

Stepping Stones

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Hikaru had been playing Go for three years online as a hobby. Then his family moved "home" to Japan, he found a Go ghost in his backyard shed, and his father started nagging him to learn Japanese...

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Stepping Stones

[Introduction](#)

[In which Hikaru discovers a Go ghost](#)

[In which Hikaru's father tries Go](#)

[In which Hikaru plays in a Go tournament](#)

[In which Hikaru visits a Go salon](#)

[In which Hikaru learns Go etiquette](#)

[In which Hikaru tries to find study Go](#)

[In which Hikaru finds study Go](#)

[In which Hikaru attends a Go convention](#)

[In which Hikaru discovers pro Go](#)

[In which Hikaru's father takes action](#)

[In which Hikaru's ghost attempts to help](#)

[In which Hikaru's friends make a choice](#)

[In which Hikaru turns down a new path](#)

[In which much time passes in small steps](#)

[In which Hikaru ventures back into Go](#)

[In which Hikaru finds a family legacy](#)

[In which Sai is introduced to Jaro](#)

[In which Hikaru boosts Jaro's reputation](#)

[In which Hikaru questions Sai's past](#)

[In which Sai sets up house](#)

[In which Sai leaves](#)

[In which Hikaru joins a club](#)

[In which Hikaru births a conspiracy](#)

[In which Sat meets an old friend](#)

[In which Hikaru unleashed a monster](#)

[In which Hikaru administers a tournament](#)

[In which Hikaru faces another ghost](#)
[In which Hikaru makes a mistake](#)
[In which Hikaru and Sai become partners](#)
[In which Akira adds clues up](#)
[In which Hikaru visits a school festival](#)
[In which Jaro's Disciples explore](#)
[In which Hikaru plays a school tournamen](#)
[In which Jaro plays a pro](#)
[In which Hikaru discovers Sai's legacy](#)
[In which Hikaru plans his future](#)
[In which Touya Meijin steps in](#)
[In which Hikaru discovers Go publication](#)
[In which Hikaru visits a new city](#)
[In which Hikaru and his father talk](#)
[In which Hikaru visits Touya Meijin](#)
[In which Touya Meijin plays Jaro](#)
[In which life goes on](#)

In which Hikaru discovers a Go ghost

Well, I had no intention of ever posting anything unless I'd already finished it, but after coming back from a break and looking at this story again I realized that I already had quite a lot written and was still interested in continuing and seeing where it goes from there. Plus I figure having it in progress online will motivate me to keep working on it more often. So, while I can't promise regular updates until it's done, I can promise that I'll do my best to get there eventually without leaving anybody hanging.

Oh, and if anyone has any better title suggestions, I welcome them. Titles and I rarely get along.

Stepping Stones

~1~ In which Hikaru discovers a Go ghost ~

Hikaru Shindo considered himself a fairly typical twelve-year-old. He enjoyed kicking around his soccer ball (not playing seriously; he didn't have enough interest to try to make a career out of it as his father had once pushed him to do), hanging out with his friends (one of whom was a girl, but was generously tolerated anyway despite her eye-rolling habit whenever the boys mentioned such things), and had developed a habit of playing an online strategy game called Go he had first discovered soon after his father had forbidden poker when Hikaru was nine. He considered the Internet an indispensable source of entertainment, information and communication; he was horrible at Spanish and good at math when the teachers let him get to the solution his own way rather than making him follow a particular process; his favorite video game was *Super Smash Bros* and his favorite movie was *Star Wars Phantom Menace*. He was, in short, a perfectly normal *American* preteen, despite being half Japanese.

Hikaru had never really learned or paid attention to much about Japan, to his father's everlasting annoyance, except for their manga (most of which he read online since his allowance usually went to snacks and movie tickets). The rest didn't have anything to do with him. And that was why, at twelve years old and having never traveled farther from the U.S. than the coast of California, he was chagrined to find out that his family was suddenly moving "home." Hikaru had always figured that *thirteen years* in and a permanent visa to another country, not to mention meeting and marrying an English-only-speaking southern-heiress American blonde, didn't count as just a *business trip* anymore, but apparently he had been laboring under a misconception. To Japan they were going.

"Start getting used to it," his father told him. "First off, you'll now be going by Shindo Hikaru. Family name first. Everything isn't Westernized at home."

"I'll *have* to get used to it seeing as I'll be drowning in all the differences," Hikaru pointed out. "What about my oral history project next month? I'm supposed to be concentrating on the stock market crash, and the Rural Electrification Act, and now my grades are going to start dropping like rocks just before I'm transferring and needing to be at my best to get into a good school..."

"Drama queen," his mother said, amused.

" *Hikaru* !" his father exclaimed, aghast, the next time he entered the house. "What did you do to your *hair* ?!"

"What?" Hikaru brushed aside his newly blond bangs with casual bewilderment. "I'm just upholding my pride in my nationality and American heritage before I'm irrevocably sundered from my roots and homeland forever."

"I'm so proud of you for using a dictionary, honey," his mother drawled.

And I ain't going somewhere where I'm going to look just like everybody else, either, Hikaru added to his friends in their online chatroom after updating them on the progress of The Departure. *Hey Ami, think you can do my whole head if I duck p.e. tomorrow?*

No freakin' way, my sister already found the dye, Ami posted back. *Besides, I didn't want to tell you, but you'd make a terrible blond.*

I gotta agree with her on that one, dude, his former best friend Jamal betrayed him. *The bangs look good though.*

Your too smart to be blond anyway, even if you are a goofball, his other former best friend Trey heaped further coals upon his head.

Yeah, sure, hit me when I'm down, Hikaru posted. *See if I remember any of you when I'm halfway around the world making new friends.*

No worries for us, Jamal posted without even any little emoticon to show he actually felt remorse. *You won't be able to understand a word any of them are saying.*

Hikaru grimaced at the screen and clicked out. That was true--despite his father's sporadic but unrelenting attempts to instill some of his homeland's culture in his son, Hikaru couldn't speak, read or write a word of any of the Japanese dialects. They were all horribly complicated and impossible to remember.

He paused and sent up a word of thanks for American schools in foreign countries, and the moving went on. Before the year was over he was looking around their new home--apparently not a totally traditional Japanese house, but still weirdly different from the real ones back in America--with not-very-motivated helplessness. His father seemed invigorated from being back on his native soil, directing Hikaru and his mother in how to slide the doors open and closed without breaking them and *under no circumstances* to set foot beyond the entryway with their shoes still on, and what seemed like a thousand other totally irrelevant things...

This is not my world, Hikaru posted to the chatroom he could still blessedly connect to with his old computer. As if to emphasize his new isolation, none of his friends was online to respond. He sighed deeply, logged off, and neglected all the miscellaneous chores his father had set him in favor of spending several hours downloading English-translated chapters of One Piece, Bleach, and Petshop of Horrors. He probably wouldn't be able to buy any volumes anymore that were actually readable.

So, how's it going in the land of the weird? Jamal posted a few weeks after Hikaru's arguably successful transplantation.

Thank God for the American school with people I can actually understand, Hikaru immediately typed. *All the other students aren't natives either. I dunno though, except for that I haven't really got anything in common with them so far. And everybody *else*--gah! You know what Japanese students do to hang out besides the girls shopping? *Karaoke*! Seriously, it's like a national pastime or something!*

Oh, I so want to see you standing up on stage belting some song you can't even pronounce the lyrics to, Ami posted. *With a bunch of girls sighing and giggling, and all the grownups gasping and clutching their hearts and collapsing...*

Here comes Pe-ter Cott-ontail, skipp-ing down the bunn-y trail, Hikaru posted irrepressibly.

liit's a small world aff-ter alll, Trey joined in.

I like big butts and I cannot lie, you otha brothas can't deny, Jamal posted. Hikaru whooped with laughter, drawing a half-attentive call of "Now now honey, no animated eviscerations before dinner."

"So, son, how is your Japanese progressing?" his father asked as he had started doing practically every night as they sat on the floor

around the table--on the floor not because their furniture hadn't arrived, but because his father insisted cushions were supposed to be furniture now.

"Uh... fine, okaa-san," Hikaru pronounced, with careful attention to repeating the word exactly as he heard it earlier.

His father, unappreciative of the effort his son had put in, thunked his head against the heel of his hand. "That's *mother* !"

"Great food, okaa-san," Hikaru said, unbothered by his mistake.

"Thank you, dear," his mother said with a complacent smile. Her husband had tried giving her several English cookbooks with Japanese recipes in them since the family's arrival; so far they had resulted in casseroles, spaghetti, and macaroni and cheese just like she had always cooked for them back home. Hikaru figured his father was putting up less of a fuss about her slowness to adapt than Hikaru's because he was waiting for her stored supplies from America to run out. He just hoped she would manage to pull out a secret stash even after that.

C'mon, seriously, what do you actually do over there? Jamal posted.

Basically nothing, Hikaru reiterated. *Well, basically same as ever except without everything I did with you guys. Surfin the Net mostly. I'd try playing Go with some of the other kids from school except the only time I mentioned it nobody even knew what it was.*

That is so an old people game, I'm always telling you, Trey posted. *Seriously, who enjoys staring at this big grid putting down checker pieces? Can't you just see the ancient grandpappies sitting all in a row out in a park playing that game as if it was chess? Who likes chess?*

People with brains, Ami posted. *People who enjoy thinking. Being able to out-think other people. You wouldn't understand.*

*Oh, hey, you will *not* believe what I found out in the shed behind the house last week, Hikaru posted. It's a great shed, the last owner stored all his junk there and didn't clean out when he moved, I'm thinking of clearing it out some and putting some of it up on eBay if I can figure out how to post in English but sell in Japan.*

This is fascinating, Jamal posted.

Edge of my seat. Tell on, Trey posted.

Shut up, morons, Hikaru posted good-humoredly. So anyway, I found this Go board in there--it's like a little wood table with legs, and it's got the grid on top, and even has two bowls of stones, black and white. And it's got a ghost.

Ghost? Trey repeated.

Oh, boy, I knew it was going to be trouble sending you off all by yourself like that, Jamal posted.

Shut up, morons, Ami posted. Stop provoking them, Ru. What d'you mean by ghost?

*I mean ghost, I swear, Hikaru typed, enjoying himself. I saw the board, I was like 'oh, cool, it looks you could play Go on that' and *bam* this flowy whitey guy pops up from nowhere sitting on the other side of the board and waving this fan at the stone bowls. He looked like a little puppy dog, all 'let's play! let's play! please please please?'*

A Go ghost, Ami repeated after a moment in which none of his friends seemed to be able to find anything to respond.

Well, I dunno really, Hikaru relented, figuring he had well and truly stumped them. Dad keeps telling me how Japan's all so high-tech and everything but there's all this weird old stuff around, and I can't understand anything I see or hear. I figure it's either a Go ghost or some kind of hologram project that got dumped or something, you

know like those computers that are supposed to be able to beat chess masters eventually? I tried playing a game against it just to see--that sucker is set on Elite level at least, I'm pretty good online but it totally creamed me, kept tch'ing and shaking its head and sighing whenever I moved. Stupid thing.

Aw, almighty hotshot, beaten by a player who's not even real, Jamal posted, recovering promptly to tease him.

You have got to get a life, how sad will it be if you start hanging out in your shed to play an old people game with some old guy ghost?
Trey posted, following the lead.

You should see if anybody else at your school likes soccer, Ami advised. Or start a movie club or something. You gotta hang out with somebody sometime.

In which Hikaru's father tries Go

Stepping Stones

~2~ In which Hikaru's father "tries" Go ~

Despite his friends' advice, as time passed Hikaru found he wasn't particularly bothered by not forming any friendships as close as the ones he had back in America. With their constant communication in the chatroom, he didn't even miss them too much. And in the meantime he surfed the Net, exchanged jokes and news from the U.S. of A. with some of the kids at the American school, and established the old shed behind his house as his own personal territory. His mother embarrassingly called it his "clubhouse."

*I decided to call it Kilimanjaro since it really is like climbing a mountain, Hikaru posted in reference to his unofficially dubbed "Go ghost." It's getting *seriously* annoying, I swear it keeps playing tutoring games against me no matter what I try!*

You should see if there's a market and start selling them, Jamal posted. You could call them JapApps, and give them mountain names according to their difficulty. Everest should be worst.

Climbing a mountain isn't hard just because of height, Ami posted. How would you include cliffs? Avalanches? Walking trails and roads there or not?

*And you guys say *I* need to get a life, Hikaru posted.*

It wasn't that Hikaru was particularly passionate about Go, just that he was a fairly intelligent boy with an interest in it who suddenly found himself divested of most of his other previous pastimes, so he naturally over time started giving more attention to it. He came to

think of it, in the face of the ghost's unwavering level of skill, as beating the game *at least once* or dying trying.

Jaro would have been a funny opponent if it hadn't always been so merciless or condescending. It gabbled presumably in Japanese in a lecturing tone quite often, and its face could shift from utterly serious to childishly amused in a heartbeat. Hikaru had never played anyone before except over the computer, and thought that it would be a much easier adjustment playing *anyone* else, especially one a little closer to his level.

The ghost tapped its fan at the spots it chose for its stones, since, being immaterial, it couldn't actually place them, and started tapping faster if Hikaru took too long placing its stone or considering his own move. Sometimes when it seemed to feel Hikaru was being particularly dense it would start smacking at his hand with the fan, over and over whirring like a little bee because the fan moved so fast--and it didn't matter that the fan was immaterial too; Hikaru's brain never managed to turn off the instinct that *something was coming at him and it was going to sting* --and flinching in reaction annoyed him even if the ghost didn't even seem to notice.

Once, just to see what would happen, Hikaru placed Jaro's stone in a different spot than where the fan was pointing. For a second the fan and extended arm were utterly still and silent, and Hikaru glanced up to see the ghost's expression was a contortion of shock and something like unbelieving righteous outrage. Hikaru broke into unabashed laughter and moved the stone where it was supposed to go before the ghost recovered.

When it did it stared at him long and meaningfully, not saying a word or making a motion, while Hikaru rolled his eyes and told it to just take a joke and get back to the game. It stared at him even more piercingly, said something incomprehensible in its other language, and turned around, crossed its arms, and refused to stir. Hikaru shrugged, swept the stones off into their pots, and wandered outside to go look around Tokyo a little more. The ghost snubbed him for another day or two, but it really didn't last very long without any

games against him (and therefore against anyone). Hikaru could only wonder what had upset it so much anyway.

*I'm getting so bored of always the same thing, he posted, utterly ignoring all his friends' pointing out that they didn't care about Go, just like they ignored everyone else's disinterest in their own hobbies. I figured since hey, I've got a board now, I'd try and lay out a few of the games online and see if they look any different offscreen, but that stupid Jaro won't let me be both sides! It just does its thrum-whapping on my hands or sits there and pouts or gives me puppy-dog eyes. How stupid is it to have to get a new board just to *not* play against one opponent?*

*But he's *lone-ly*, Hi-ka-ruu, Trey posted, with several silly emoticon faces. You're his only *friieend*.*

What kind of moron would leave behind a Go board and ghost anyway? Hikaru typed. I oughta just shut the shed up again and leave well enough alone. But he didn't really have any intention of doing so. He still hadn't beaten the game.

The first time he found and printed a few tip sheets for facing high-level players on the Net and decided to take them to the shed to consult while playing brought an unexpected reaction from the Go ghost. Hikaru just sat down on his side of the board like usual, took the pot of black stones and plopped one down to begin a game, and started looking at the sheets. He did know that he would still have to pay attention to place Jaro's stone, but it still startled him when the ghost suddenly moved to his side and leaned over his shoulder with an unintelligible exclamation and rapt attention directed at the papers. Hikaru jerked back, turned and stared at him.

"Jeez! What ?"

The fan aimed at the topmost lines of explanation under the example diagrams, followed by a flow of excited, disbelieving chatter. The fan

brandished several times in emphasis of presumable points.

"What?" Hikaru repeated, annoyed. "Yeah, duh, I haven't been babbling like a nutcase all this time after all, I'm just speaking a different language than you. *En-GLISH*. Not so dumb after all? Maybe something is capable of getting through that thick skull if I just start thwapping more? Bug off, it's not like you can read it."

But his order had no effect on the ghost. After it finally calmed slightly, it sat itself down on its side of the board again very precisely as always and, instead of tapping its move, announced something indistinguishable with a proud air and looked at him expectantly.

"No speak-a Japanese-a," Hikaru drawled.

With a very exaggerated gesture, the ghost pointed its fan at itself and enunciated a short phrase.

"Fujiwaranosai," Hikaru repeated, muttering, with a frown. "Fujiawara Nosai, Fujiwarano Sai--Sai Fujiwarano?... 'no', that's like... uh... Fujiwara of the Sai? Uh, Sai of--Fujiwa ra Nosai...?"

The ghost made an exasperated sound.

"Hey, Fuji!" Hikaru exclaimed, giving up on attempting to parse the language. "That's a Japanese mountain, isn't it--okay, Fuji it is."

The ghost repeated the original phrase, sounding distinctly more bad-tempered.

"Hikaru Sh--I mean, Shindo Hi--gah. *Hi-ka-ru*," Hikaru said, pointing to himself.

"*Hikaru*," the ghost repeated impatiently.

"Hey, great!" Hikaru beamed at it. "Hikaru, Fuji. I dunno though, I kinda got used to Jaro. Okay, okay. C'mon, play. You don't put something down I'm gonna win by forfeit, okay? *You-no-play--me win*."

The ghost whacked at him with the fan. Hikaru would've given anything to be able to switch it out with a flyswatter and see how long it took Jaro--Fuji to notice.

"Hey mom! Ohayo!" Hikaru shouted as he entered the house, kicking off his shoes almost without a pause as he hurried on to his room.

"Hi honey, how was school?" his mother answered absently from the kitchen in a tone that didn't actually expect a response.

"That's *good morning*," his father's voice followed in a groan, also from the kitchen. " *Formally* . Can it really be this hard? Am I cursed with a son incapable of learning anything?"

"He learned Go," his mother pointed out mildly. "That looks like a pretty complex game."

" *Games*," his father uttered despondently.

"Hey, don't knock 'em 'til you've tried 'em!" Hikaru called, taking advantage of their new house's paper-thin walls.

"Keep your shoes on, Ru," Hikaru's mother called just as he was in the act of kicking them off.

"What? Why?" he asked, quickly stuffing them back on as she came into the hallway.

"Your father found a Go tournament you can enter today," she said with a smile. "I suppose it's his way of 'trying' it."

"Aw mom, I don't wanna play with a bunch of old geezers, there's enough of them online," Hikaru groaned. "They nitpick everything! Do I have to?"

"Considering he already signed you up, I'd say so," his mother replied. At his second groan, she pointed out, "Well, it's not like you could have gotten in without help, honey. Come on, there might be a few *young* geezers in it, like you're turning into. Your father says Go is actually much bigger in Japan than it is in America."

"Fine," Hikaru sighed, taking the paper she offered and glancing down at it uncomprehendingly. "Oh--is this how to get there?"

"I had him draw a map," his mother agreed, looking pleased. "Since it's so hard to distinguish all those signs from one another."

"Tell me about it," Hikaru muttered, glancing at the directions again and then stuffing them into his backpack. "So I gotta go now? When does it start?"

His mother glanced at their clock. "I think he said about four."

Hikaru stifled a swear word since his mother was present and took off running. His mother just smiled after him.

A/N: Thanks to everybody who reviewed, and sorry this chapter is a little shorter than the last one. Given a couple of comments in the reviews I got, just in case this chapter didn't clear things up enough, let me take a shot at explaining Sai's situation in this story: Since this is AU anyway, Sai didn't bond to Hikaru when they met. He's haunting the goban, and that's all; it's not very logical to me that he could possess more than one thing. And, much as it pains me, Hikaru still isn't a particularly sensitive boy, so he's not thinking of Sai as a real person yet, and won't for a while--though I promise they'll get there eventually. It's more about him than him and Sai, if that makes sense; Sai will just become more important to him later.

In which Hikaru plays in a Go tournament

Stepping Stones

~ 3 ~ In which Hikaru takes part in a Go tournament ~

Hikaru did not enjoy playing the bunch of old geezers, especially since it was in person. They were either irritated or condescending about his apparent inexperience holding the stones--just because all of them seemed to use some kind of stupid unnecessary index-middle finger balancing act--and grumbled at his posture, just because he didn't sit rigidly straight for hours on end like them. Hikaru played each game with one or the other elbow on the table and his chin in his hand, slumped to the left or right, keeping himself entertained by trying to set up a hierarchy in his head of how each of the geezers' levels ranked compared to the ghost's. He mumbled his way through the Japanese they recited at the beginning of the game each time, pretending to just be uninterested in (presumable) formalities.

He noticed, peripherally, that fewer and fewer people were playing as time went on, which made sense considering his mother had called it a tournament, but he just kept following the other people who won and doing the same as they did to record their wins, then going to whatever table he was pointed to for the next game. He got increasingly preoccupied since it took a surprising mental twist and focus to integrate the aim of just playing up to the ghost's level as much as possible and the aim of actually beating the opponent like online--real-life playing, unexpectedly, had a totally different atmosphere--but he mastered it, increasingly motivated the once or twice he came close to losing.

With his preoccupation, it came as a total surprise to finish his last game and realize that he and his opponent were playing the only game left. Then there were a bunch of people clustering around him, none of whom he could understand, and he was being ushered up

onto some kind of platform while everyone clapped and smiled and looked at him. Hikaru surreptitiously checked for exits while the (presumable) spokesperson started some kind of monologue.

He perked up when he caught sight of the shiny trophy being handed to him, but deflated again when nothing else seemed to follow. A cash prize would have been worth playing for, not that he yet trusted himself to count and dispense yen accurately, but what good was a trophy except for bragging to people who didn't care? But everyone was still smiling and looking at him while he tried to figure out how to hold the trophy comfortably without looking like an idiot, and the spokesperson was making little expectant motions at him.

Crap. What was the word for 'thank you'? 'It's an honor'?

"Uhh... sorry, mute. Can't speak a word. Gee, thanks awfully, thrilled, shocked, always grateful, gotta run. Bye!"

He edged back and then hurried to the door, feeling a little embarrassed at having to escape these people but not really wanting to spend any more time there anyway. He felt like an idiot going home with the stupid trophy under his arm, and dumped it in a corner as soon as he got to his room. So much for Go in real life. He didn't even feel like playing Fuji. He'd probably get creamed after spending so long at high amateur level rather than ungodly master.

Hikaru logged online and started browsing the Internet Movie Database to see what was coming out back in America that he would, yet again, have to miss. *Crap*. Maybe if he could find one of those questionably legal streaming websites that worked in Japan...?

"Honey," his mother said, stopping Hikaru as he was about to head out the door. "Going to your clubhouse?"

"Yeah. It's just a shed," he said automatically, wondering what she wanted. She gestured for him to sit down with her at the real table

she had somehow managed to convince his father to buy. He did so. He wasn't in any particular hurry; humble pie tasted the same warm or cold.

"How's your Japanese coming?" she asked.

Hikaru stared at her. He was used to hearing that every other sentence from his dad, but from his *mom* --she was supposed to be his ally. His only other totally-American helpless-without-English person in the whole country so far besides at school.

He shrugged. "Lousy as ever. Why?"

"Your father just got a promotion in his company."

"O-kay... great?" he offered, clueless as to what that had to do with anything.

"That's just meant to emphasize a point. I'm beginning to wonder if it's really sunk into you that we're not going to be moving again."

Hikaru sat and blinked for a moment. Of course he knew that. Unless maybe... well, no, he knew that. Japan was where they lived now. America only used to be home. "Yeah, I know."

"You've adapted admirably to the move," his mother continued, smiling briefly at him. "In fact I was a little surprised you handled it so maturely and even helped out so much. And you seem to find enough to do every day with school and your computer and clubhouse."

"Yeah," Hikaru repeated, still just sitting there.

"But you're not adapting to the new culture around you, honey. You can't interact with anyone you meet outside of school. You can't take in any movies or books or even wander around the city much without risking getting lost. You're only twelve--it should be far easier for you to get used to a new country than me."

"Well--but--I dunno," Hikaru protested. "I'm just horrible with other languages, Mom, you know that; I never got more than a C even in Spanish, and that's supposed to be easy. Japanese's *hard*."

"It's hard just like Spanish was hard," his mother agreed, looking him in the eye. "Because you don't use it in your day-to-day life."

Hikaru squirmed a little, because his only answer to that was 'Er.' The entire rest of the conversation was now clear to him. "'S'not like it's easy to talk with people when you only know like three words," he attempted to defend himself.

"Ru--" His mother reached out and squeezed his hand. "You are brilliant when you choose to be, no matter what the subject. You're not choosing to be brilliant applying yourself to this new language. And you can see how much that's shutting you out of. So why don't you want to?"

He shifted again, a little uncomfortable. "Yeah, I can see everything I could be doing if I could communicate with people. But--well--I don't *want* to, Mom. I'm not interested in any of it. All those people--everything is so-- *different* ; they're not the same kinds of movies, not the same kind of food, not the same kind of interests. Seriously, can you see me going out with a bunch of friends to *sing karaoke* after school? *Ever* ?"

"Hikaru, karaoke is hardly the only thing Japanese children like to do," his mother laughed. "Take the time to actually look for things that appeal more to you. Ask some of the other American students about things they've found around the city that they like. Just be willing to open your mind a little."

"Okay, okay," Hikaru conceded, mostly to get out of the conversation. "I really gotta go now Mom, I left my computer running and I have this project I gotta have ready before school tomorrow..."

"You were heading out before," his mother pointed out mildly, amused, but her son didn't even hear as he was already leaving.

Hikaru was surprised beyond belief to hear a Japanese voice hail him as soon as he stepped out of the school gate, so much so that if he hadn't seen a Japanese boy who looked a little older than him waving at him he would have assumed he didn't have anything to do with it. But since the kid clearly was looking at him, Hikaru stood there and stared dumbly as the boy came running up, another taller and even older-looking boy in tow. The kid let out a stream of excited meaninglessness when he reached him while jabbing his finger at Hikaru several times.

"He say you play Go?" the taller boy said carefully with an unpracticed accent. "See you... win Go...?"

"Yes!" Hikaru cheered, throwing his book up in the air and not even noticing when it crashed to the sidewalk. "English! Hallelujah glory! Nice to meet you, beautiful examples of civilization in the foreign wasteland! Let's go get some pizza and celebrate!"

The two Japanese boys looked at each other; the shorter one said something, and the taller one stifled something. Then he turned back to Hikaru and asked haltingly, "You... have play Go?"

"Yeah, sure," Hikaru agreed, hardly able to believe that a semi-English-speaking Japanese stranger should approach him who also happened to know the game. "Yes. Why?"

The shorter boy looked triumphant, and said something to the taller one again. The taller one listened, then explained to Hikaru, "He say English win Go tournament, think look at English school--he happy he right."

"Genius. You should be so proud of that awesome level of explanation, too," Hikaru said to the shorter one. "Hey, c'mon, let's not just stand around here talking. Got a place to go--er, hang out? Uh, food? Arcade? Park? You know, anything?"

The taller one conferred with the shorter one, then the shorter one nodded and waved Hikaru along as he started off down the street. Hikaru grabbed his schoolbook before he forgot it and followed readily, stuffing it into his backpack as he went.

They showed him to some kind of small Japanese shop offering food, the only option of which he recognized was ramen. So he pointed to that, trusting that the other two could truthfully show him correct change if the price proved complicated. He had no idea what food they chose when they ordered or when it arrived.

"So, who are you guys anyway? Why find me?" he asked as they all waited to dig in. "Oh, I'm Hikaru Sh--I mean, Shindo Hikaru. You?"

He got their names as Waya something-longer (the shorter one) and Isumi something-longer (the taller one), so he mentally labeled them Waya and Isumi before he remembered that those were their last names. Oh well. Japanese people seemed big on formality and familiarity anyway.

"So you play Go too?" he asked genially as his ramen arrived--with chopsticks. Crap.

Noodles and *water* with *chopsticks* ?! Were these people *completely* insane?!

"Yes," Isumi said, after shoving Waya out of the booth with a short direction. "You win Meijin?"

"Huh?"

Waya returned with, blessedly, a spoon. Hikaru grabbed it with a happy sigh and started eating.

"Small Meijin tournament," Isumi repeated carefully, seeming to pay close attention to his words. Actually he spoke pretty good English, much better than Hikaru had heard so far outside of school.

"Beats me what it was called--wait..." He leaned over and dug around in his backpack for the crumpled directions he had shoved in and never bothered to find and throw away--there was a line of Japanese characters along the top of the paper. And his father said he should clean his bag out more often. "Does that say what it was?"

Waya leaned forward to look and took it out of his hand. He pointed at the characters while jabbering at Isumi.

"Yes," Isumi agreed, a smile spreading across his face. "Meijin. You win?"

That question had already been repeated several times, Hikaru was sure, but this time it sounded like personal curiosity. "Yeah, I guess," he said, shrugging. "They gave me a trophy. Prize? But no money. Waste of time."

Waya spoke again. Isumi listened, then translated, "He want play you."

Hikaru blinked, surfacing from his ramen. "Why?"

Translate, pause, translate. "He say surprising English win. He want know how good your Go."

"Don't tell me those geezers were anything special. Come on, that had to be like a totally open tournament for me to have been able to get in. Say I'll play him online. GoStar."

Isumi frowned slightly, evidently not recognizing the website. Then again, Hikaru had no idea if it had an option for navigating in Japanese. Well, he knew of a couple other sites, even if he didn't visit them much...

"NetGo?"

Isumi's expression cleared. Even Waya appeared to understand the name. They quickly agreed to meet on NetGo that night, and

exchanged screen names (probably incomprehensible to both receiving parties, but useful for matching visually) and phone numbers, even though Hikaru didn't think phoning would be very practical considering it would require the other two being on the same line if Waya wanted to be included. Well, maybe they were brothers--no, duh, Waya and Isumi were the last names and those couldn't possibly be two different pronunciations for the same word. Surely.

"You're late," his father called from the kitchen when Hikaru got home.

"Networking," Hikaru yelled back, heading to his room minus shoes. "Can I eat in my room?"

"No. And stop making excuses you don't even put any effort into!"

"Okay, next time I'll come up with a real doozy," Hikaru smirked. "The elephants attacked. Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers and the news crews blocked up all the roads home so I had to wait until they cleared. I got on the train exactly on time but it was hijacked by terrorists in samurai costumes who made us all stand against the wall and guess what era of swords they were holding..."

"Hikaru!"

A/N: Okay, here's chapter three, and again thanks very much to all the reviewers who left feedback! Things have calmed down a little in real life so I should finally have time to start replying individually. As for the tournament--no, it wasn't the children's one, but I hope it's still at least relatively reasonable that Hikaru managed to win? My logic is basically just that he really has learned a lot from Sai already. I don't actually play Go myself so I don't know if the progress I'm trying to show him making is realistic, random, or just totally off the wall. :)

In which Hikaru visits a Go salon

Stepping Stones

~ 4 ~ In which Hikaru is introduced to Go salons ~

You will not believe the drama that's happening at school right now, Ami posted. The math teacher--remember him, Mr. McNasty?--got fired because it turned out he was selling weed to the high school students after hours. Can you believe it? In our own school!

Your school, Hikaru reminded her. Weed--yeah, totally unbelievable. Did you get any before he got arrested?

Hikaru! she posted, then followed it with a little laughing face. *You are such a brat!*

Guilty as charged.

So, what's happening with you lately?

Nothin' much. Been playing a few games online with a couple Japanese guys I met. So far I'm 3-2 with Go and 2-2 with Missile Command. I've almost got his game figured out though.

We always knew it'd be other nerds you'd meet after us, Ami posted with a smiley face emoticon.

A smart bomb falls toward your city. My defending missile flies off on the total other side of the screen. You go boom. I laugh, Hikaru typed.

"Where are we going?" Hikaru asked, bewildered, when Waya and Isumi showed up again in front of his school out of the blue and started dragging him off.

"Go salon," Isumi explained. It sounded exactly like the first time he said it, but it still made no sense to Hikaru. Salons were beauty parlors and hair and nail places and stuff, weren't they? What did Isumi think he was saying?

Waya added something, and Isumi translated, "We want see you play other people. Will be fun."

"Fun for you or me?" Hikaru complained, but went along willingly enough. Waya and Isumi didn't seem that much older than him, especially Waya; maybe they had places they went to play Go with other decent kids rather than geezers.

The Go salon--for lack of a better term--did turn out to be full of old geezers, but they at least seemed a little more lively than the ones Hikaru had interacted with before. Several of them seemed to recognize and greet Waya and Isumi. Hikaru could tell he was the subject of several questions, but he had no idea what they actually consisted of, which might have annoyed him if he hadn't dismissed them all.

Waya threw his arm around Hikaru's shoulders as he appeared to answer, whatever he was saying drawing several impressed and disbelieving looks and more questions. Isumi noticed long enough to take pity on Hikaru's ignorance and tell him, "We say you English, win small Meijin, they say you young, not look like Go player."

"What, so now they're all waiting for the little monkey to open its mouth and start its tricks?" Hikaru asked, still mostly good-humored rather than grumbling. He glanced around at the geezers paying attention and shrugged deliberately. "They just wanna stare, or can any of them actually play?"

Isumi translated for him with a pause that might have been diplomatic editing. He was a polite sort, not the kind Hikaru usually hung out with--the ex-American actually got along much more naturally with Waya despite the language barrier--but Hikaru was no

longer as choosy as he used to be. Besides, the older boy was a pretty good Go opponent.

Several of the geezers presented immediate challenges that required no translation after Isumi's words. Hikaru found himself sitting down against the most forceful one--and one who actually didn't look old enough to qualify as a geezer--who grabbed his arm and pointed at a table.

Despite the almost rude-seeming handling, the guy rattled off the introductory phrase that Hikaru had heard repeated over and over at the tournament. And this time there was enough attention on him that his mumbling wouldn't go unnoticed.

"Er--onigamisu," he tried.

Waya and several of the geezers watching choked. His opponent threw his head back and laughed.

"Onegaishimasu," Isumi sounded out for him slowly.

"Onegaishimasu," Hikaru repeated, concentrating on it intently, and repeated it several times mentally. 'Onegaishimasu.' Meaning--what? "What's it in English?"

Isumi thought for a moment. "Please. Give guidance," he finally said.

That seemed a little stupid, but Hikaru nodded. "Got it."

His opponent reached across the table and ruffled his hair. Hikaru batted at his hand, annoyed, and made the first move without giving his opponent the option of choosing his color. The guy laughed again and played his own move.

It was weird playing Go when he was aware of so many people watching, harder to concentrate on the game--but, automatically starting to categorize the guy against the ghost like he had last time he'd played in person, he was fairly sure pretty quickly that this guy

was only halfway there tops. More like a third tops. Hikaru could beat him, and knowing that made it a lot easier to concentrate. The ghost was turning out to be useful in that respect even if it was still impossible to have a close-to-real match against it.

Actually, playing the ghost was probably also the reason he'd started finding his old opponents too easy and spurting up notches of ranks online. Or it was partly the reason, anyway; he did pretty much do nothing else but Go at least a quarter of almost every day now.

His current opponent, thankfully, turned out to be a better loser than most of the geezers at the tournament had been. Several of the geezers watching reacted much the same as those other players, though, muttering in disbelief.

"Anybody else?" Hikaru asked, stretching deliberately and faking a yawn. But he had to duck before he finished when the guy swatted at him again.

"Kawai-san say you brat," Isumi said a laughing tone. "He say bad you good as you say."

Hikaru stuck out his tongue at the guy--Kawai. Wait, wasn't that supposed to mean 'cute'? "Tell him I've had better games against my granny." Never minding, of course, that his American grandmother had died when he was two and he was only vaguely aware that his Japanese grandmother could be around somewhere. Kawai seemed the type to understand the sentiment properly.

Kawai made an absurd face at him and dramatically retired from the Go table. One of the nitpickiest-looking geezers immediately took his place.

"Onegaishimasu," Hikaru said promptly, holding out the pots to let the geezer pick his color. Instead of appreciating Hikaru's politeness the geezer glared at him and lectured at Isumi in a dry rasping voice.

Isumi explained something back to him, then asked Hikaru, "You know nigiri?"

Hikaru thought. He had never heard of 'nigiri,' but presumably it meant that little ritual from the tournament in which Hikaru had followed his opponent's lead and somehow ended up with one color or the other. He wrinkled his nose, frowning, and carefully set the pots down. The geezer made a 'ha' grunt.

Hikaru dipped his hand into the pot of white stones, came up with a fistful, and held it suspended over the board. The geezer dropped two black stones onto the board. Hikaru turned his hand up, let the white stones spill out, and arranged them into two rows of four with one left over. The geezer didn't move.

The number of white was odd. The number of black was even. The geezer hadn't guessed correctly. Hikaru put his stones back and handed the geezer the pot of white, taking the black, the color that got to go first, for himself. The geezer grunted grudgingly and pushed the two black stones over to him. Hikaru added them to his pot, turned to look up at Waya and Isumi and asked, "Nigiri?"

Isumi nodded, smiling. Waya clapped him on the back. The geezer harrumphed and gestured at the board.

Hikaru played. The geezer was even worse than the first guy, Kawai; the game seemed to take forever. And, of course, the geezer was a very ungracious loser. Hikaru was surprised when rather than rising immediately and leaving the geezer instead kept sitting there, jabbing a finger at different areas of the board and starting to speak in a dry, grim tone.

He glanced back at Waya and Isumi helplessly. Isumi started explaining, "He discuss game after end. Where mistake, where other option, how could be different..."

"And the part about me being totally ignorant of the language somehow escaped him...?" Hikaru asked, glancing back to the

geezer, who had kept talking even grimmer while he was being ignored.

Waya made a dismissive sound and gesture, but Isumi sighed, brought over another chair, and started translating laboriously for the geezer, who showed his appreciation by refusing to slow down, back up or simplify. Hikaru didn't pay him any attention. What was there to learn from a game he won?

"No offense, but that really wasn't very exciting," Hikaru said to the duo after they left, stretching in the fresh evening air after sitting so long. "How come you guys go there?"

"Training," Isumi said. "Better Go when play more people."

Well, that did make sense. Hikaru thought that even better Go came from playing against the impossible, though; he'd probably learned a lot more from the ghost's incessant tutoring than he had all three years before online. And still not actually any closer to beating its game.

"Fun to see small Meijin play them, too," Isumi added for Waya after he had updated for his friend. "They not believe you so good."

Hikaru just shrugged. "What makes one tournament any different from another? It could've just been luck there wasn't anyone better in that one. And what's meijin mean, anyway?"

Isumi, and by extension Waya, stopped and stared at him. Actually Waya almost ran into Isumi, which made him stop and question him irritably--Isumi told him something incomprehensible, and then both of them stared at him. Waya's jaw actually dropped.

"What?" Hikaru demanded, annoyed.

"All tournament same?" Isumi repeated slowly, as though he wanted to be sure he had heard and understood right the first time. "You not know Meijin?"

"I know *no* Japanese, remember?" Hikaru reminded them impatiently. "Seriously, what'd I say? What's *meijin*?"

"*Meijin*--title," Isumi struggled to explain. "*Meijin*--big. Small *Meijin*--big to small player."

Small *meijin* hadn't meant much before, but now Hikaru suspected it was a not very good English substitution, because small player was ridiculous. He wasn't that short, and not all the old geezers had been that hunched. What could it mean?

"Small player... someone who plays in tournaments?" he guessed, puzzled.

"Y--no," Isumi said, frustrated. "It..." He turned to Waya, and they quizzed each other briefly, presumably trying to come up with a way to explain the inexplicable. They didn't appear to come to a very satisfactory agreement.

"Some people play Go--fun. Not work. Little time Go," Isumi finally said slowly. "Some people play Go--work. Every day Go. Teach, play. Job."

Hikaru blinked at them. "Professional?" He blinked again. "There are people who play Go *professionally*?"

But then again, that was what chess Grand Masters were--at least he thought--so it might be reasonable to have some kind of tiny professional Go world once he adjusted to that as conceivable. But--good grief. He couldn't possibly have gotten involved with that just by playing in one public tournament, could he? Or could anybody become professional in Go in Japan just by deciding to and playing and paying a lot, like poker? Had there been an entrance fee on that tournament his father had paid for him?

"Okay... professional. Some people play Go professional, some people--me--" he jabbed his chest with his thumb for emphasis, "play Go amateur. Okay? So not small-- *amateur* ."

"Professional," Isumi repeated carefully. "Amateur."

"Right." Hikaru thought again. "So amateur meijin--I got some kind of title? Amateur title? How important is it?" The trophy he'd gotten from the tournament had disappeared at some point under a pile of clothes he hadn't taken time to put away or decide if they really counted as dirty or not. If it was even still in the same place. "It can't be that big a deal, can it?"

Waya made what sounded like a demand for information up to that point. Isumi complied, received a comment, and got back to Hikaru, "Professional Meijin very big in Go--one most high title. Amateur Meijin... like same, amateur."

Hikaru blinked again. Crap. How could he have won a big deal amateur title when he didn't even know what it was called? How big a difference was it from professional? "Does it matter? I mean, like--there isn't anything I missed like contracts or something, is there? There isn't anything I'm supposed to do or someplace I'm supposed to be? No obligations?"

What had he gotten himself into? Or rather, what had his stupid father gotten him into? If he was in trouble without even knowing...

"No, no," Isumi assured him. "Amateur nothing but--talk about. Nothing but proud. No duty with title."

Hikaru let out a deep sigh of relief. Waya laughed.

"You not know nothing about Go?" Isumi translated, looking slightly embarrassed although he probably couldn't phrase it more tactfully. "But play so good?"

"I know the *game*, not all this with the--the other people and the real-life stuff," Hikaru defended himself. "I learned it on the Internet--online. NetGo. I never knew there was all this with titles and tournaments and professionals and who knows what else! Online everything's casual!"

Isumi translated, with a faint frown that made Hikaru wonder how much of what he said was being translated accurately, and then Waya grinned and put his arm around Hikaru's shoulders again.

"Now you know us," Isumi translated. "Now you learn real Go."

Hikaru refrained from pointing out that he most certainly already knew real Go considering his current number of wins versus Waya's so far in their online matches. He could stand more face-to-face Go as a substitute for hanging out; even the Internet was starting to pall just a little with such constant heavy use of it.

"I'll bet you have to do with the whole professional thing somehow, Fuji," Hikaru said thoughtfully, not giving his whole attention to the game since he was getting slaughtered anyway. "You've gotta be at that level. Right? Sound logical to you?"

The ghost gave him an annoyed look and tapped the board with its fan. Hikaru put down its stone and absently considered what that new threat meant to his teetering group of stones in the bottom left corner.

"S'pose everybody has a ghost in their backyard shed they play against that's impossible to beat?"

He picked the spot that looked like it had the greatest chance of saving him and dropped his stone on it.

"Or you s'pose it'd sound totally crazy if I ever mentioned it, even if there are other yous out there?"

Fuji looked down at his latest stone with a blink that almost looked like surprise, then tapped the fan quickly and decisively. Hikaru's section of territory split like a fence of dry wood.

"Yeah, probably crazy. Heck, maybe you are a ghost and I *am* crazy. But it's all good, yeah?"

He placed another stone for himself. The ghost smacked its forehead with its fan.

"Ah c'mon, gimme a break."

A/N: So there we have it--the Heart of Stone and Kawai make cameo appearances, and Hikaru finally discovers the existence of professional Go. He just still has no idea what he's getting himself into. Good thing he has friends like these... :)

Again, thanks so much everyone who left such wonderful reviews--they really encourage me to keep this story going. I'll try to update about once a week, I just can't guarantee that pace once I run out of already-finished chapters. That won't be for a while, though, so hopefully the buffer will mean you never have to wait much longer until the story's finished. The buffer is a very good thing right now, since I just discovered WoW... that game is seriously addictive...

In which Hikaru learns Go etiquette

A/N: Okay, this chapter is a little shorter than usual, but the next will be the longest yet. I'm not sure I'm satisfied with this one or not. Oh, and I forgot to mention last time: special thanks to all the reviewers who told me about their real-life experiences with Go and learning a new language and such, since that's incredibly useful and most of them were anonymous so I can't reply personally. :) All comments and critiques always welcome!

Stepping Stones

~ 5 ~ In which Hikaru learns Go etiquette ~

"So, son, you never mentioned how you did in that Go tournament," Hikaru's father said with a sort of stiff casualness as the two of them sat down for dinner.

"Eh? Okay," Hikaru said, distracted. "Uh, Mom, why is the rice on a plate instead of a bowl?"

"I thought I'd try a slightly more Japanese method," his mother explained serenely, over his father's muttered humph. "They're just balls of rice. Think of it as finger food now."

"Is it clean?" Hikaru objected, poking at one of the vaguely round lumps of stickyish grains with the tip of his fork. Most of the time he would have been all for turning things into finger food--that was how he ate waffles, back when they had waffles to eat--but only when it was food he liked to begin with. "What's extra in there to make it clump like that? You didn't put in anything new, did you?"

"Oh for heaven's sake," his father huffed. "It's *rice*, Hikaru, it won't poison you. Be quiet and eat the meal your mother has so graciously prepared."

Hikaru subsided with his own muttered humph, poking the balls of rice once more before extracting his fork too. At least they did actually seem to be just rice smooshed into a roundish shape, not the actual rice balls pictured in manga every now and then--whatever those rice balls actually consisted of. His mother's skill in adapting to new recipes seemed to be about on par with Hikaru's willingness to try new foods that looked suspicious.

"Your homework coming along well, dear?" his mother asked comfortably before they could fall into silence. "Maybe your father can help you with Japanese for a little while."

"That's okay, I'm doing fine," Hikaru assured her, and quickly filled his mouth with the dubious rice, trying to make a convincing 'mmm-mm' expression. At least it didn't taste any worse than normal rice.

"This Nase-chan, Shindo," Isumi introduced the strange girl when he, Waya and Hikaru met up at a new cafe for lunch. "She play Go too."

"Oha--" Hikaru started politely, then stopped. Ohayo was a 'good morning.' And formal, too, wasn't it? "Er... konnichiwa." Or was that another good morning? Or a goodbye?

Nase gave him a slightly funny look. Crap. Waya laughed and said something to her in an explaining tone.

"Konnichiwa," she repeated to Hikaru, after a slight pause, and smiled at him. Hikaru smiled back, relieved that she was at least willing to not laugh in his face at his ineptitude like some people. "Shindo-kun?"

"Nah, just Hikaru," he said breezily. "Uh, kun. Hikaru-kun. But Hikaru's fine if you want."

She smiled again, blankly, and repeated, "Hikaru-kun."

"Uh..." Even the word for 'yes' refused to present itself in Hikaru's mind, despite having been drilled in repeatedly. "Yeah."

"Nase-chan teach children Go," Isumi told him, before an awkward pause could develop. "She teach you how hold stone, discuss, all you need."

"Oh. Uh, thanks. Sure. Does it really matter how I hold the stones?"

Isumi translated for the other two. Nase pursed her lips slightly and Waya rolled his eyes and said something lecturingly.

"You learn some, you learn all," Isumi translated. "You know how hold stone, other player think you know Go. Not so surprise when you win."

"So much for creating a deliberate illusion before I wipe them into oblivion, huh?" Hikaru considered only briefly before shrugging again. He'd already agreed. "Fine by me. You wanna do it after we eat?"

Isumi translated, and the four agreed. Hikaru decided he could definitely see Nase teaching kids how to play Go despite (probably) not being much older than him. As soon as their food arrived, she started trying to show him how to effectively wield the chopsticks with his ramen. She was pretty patient, too--he was just proving to be even worse with chopsticks than he was with Japanese.

Afterward the trio took him to a building further down the street that seemed to be some kind of Go place other than a salon, and led him inside to a room with a Go board already sitting in the middle of it--without a table underneath. Hikaru sighed when he saw the cushions instead of chairs that he had been so glad to chuck from his house's kitchen. Japanese people had such weird taste...

While Waya and Isumi just hung out, chatting with each other in low tones or wandering out of the room and eventually back in, Nase helped Hikaru practice holding the stones between his index and

middle finger. It was actually an easy position, it was just harder actually holding something that way, especially the control required to pick up and set down a stone using just those two fingers. All it would take to master was trying it over and over until his muscles learned.

Then, through Isumi, she instructed him on sitting in 'seiza'--rigidly straight, like the old geezers in the tournament, with his feet tucked underneath him since he was on a cushion instead of a chair--which, apparently, had no actual purpose but was traditional. Hikaru decided after about fifteen minutes that there was no freaking way he was going to inflict that on himself regularly just because it was somebody else's tradition.

Nase also drilled him on several other Go-related terms, making sure as much as possible that he understood the concepts of each of them: 'komi,' the extra points white got since black had the advantage of going first; 'moku,' the points themselves; 'yose,' the endgame of a match when most of the board was filled with stones; 'atari,' 'tsumego,' 'ko'... even what the board and pots of stones were called, a 'goban' and 'goke.' It made Hikaru's head hurt, but he committed each one to memory.

And finally, still through Isumi, she took him through the tradition of discussing the game after it concluded: how it was an opportunity for both players to critique both sides, to find their mistakes so they would remember them next time; to consider, with their opponent's input, how it might have played out differently if they had chosen different hands. At the end Hikaru would have said he was fully confident in playing Go with other people if only he was capable of doing anything more than just the playing.

"No, that was not *fun*," he snorted at Isumi as they finally left the room, presumably heading toward the lobby. After such a cram session Hikaru had no idea where they were in the building or how they had gotten there when they arrived. But Waya and Isumi both seemed familiar with it--Nase too, considering she went off in another direction after exchanging goodbyes. "Learning is never fun.

But informative, yes. I'm going to have to spend hours now doing something mindless and relaxing just to keep my brain from getting sick with indigestion."

Isumi just patted him on the back. Most of that last part had probably gone completely over his head. Waya knuckled Hikaru's head (curse two inches of height) and said something cheerful that Isumi didn't notice or didn't bother to translate.

"Now you only need Japanese," Isumi remarked.

Hikaru groaned. "Need for what? Besides everyday life, any human interaction, and life-saving crises and all that junk?"

Isumi translated to Waya. Both boys just smiled.

Konnichiwa? Jamal posted. *What's that supposed to mean?*

Just hello, Hikaru posted. *Well, a version of hello, and one that didn't get me weird looks and snickers, so I'm sticking with it until then. Figures the one that sounds kind of like hello is never the right one. It's ridiculous how many versions of *hey* there are in Japanese!*

Hello. Hi. Hey. Good morning. Morning. Good afternoon. Afternoon. Good evening. Evening, Trey posted. *Yo. Howdy. What's up? Dude. Guys.*

Shut up! Hikaru posted, laughing despite himself. *You are *so* annoying!*

How's it going? Nice to see you. It's been too long. Fancy meeting you here...

Dude, if you don't cut it out I am going to come over to your house and throw your computer out the window, Jamal posted. *Point made.*

Nooo*, *Betsy! Trey posted, with an animated wailing face.

Betsy? Hikaru and Jamal posted almost simultaneously.

Betsy? What kind of ancient junk have you been reading? Jamal posted.

I am never again acknowledging you as my friend, Hikaru posted.
Have a good cry over it with Molly the mouse and Kitty the keyboard and Susy the screen. Just don't forget your tears might kill them.

You guys are *mee-eaan.*

Tough love baby, Hikaru and Jamal posted in unison.

In which Hikaru tries to find study Go

Stepping Stones

~ 6 ~ In which Hikaru attempts to find "study Go" ~

Once more, not really expecting to find anything he'd missed, Hikaru looked up from the paper in his hand to the incomprehensible street signs filling the air between the buildings around him. He didn't find anything he'd missed. He was officially lost.

And he still didn't even know exactly what he was trying to meet Waya and Isumi for, since 'study Go' required a little more real-life explanation than Isumi's limited English. Getting there on his own had seemed easy enough at the time--Isumi had told him what station to get off at and scribbled down several signs to find that would apparently lead him there--but he must have gotten off at the wrong station after all. There was no way to check; there was no point in writing down the character that corresponded with the word over the sound system on the train, and Isumi couldn't use English letters to sound it out on paper.

After meditating for a few minutes, confirming that he was most definitely lost, Hikaru settled on what seemed like the most practical option for getting himself back on track. He put on the biggest, most helpless and apologetic smile he could, grabbed a passerby, and pointed at the characters Isumi had listed on the paper. "Know where I find, please?"

Several passersby later, Hikaru was happily setting off down the indicated street, trying to juggle all the written characters in his mind since he had no idea which one he was closest to the sign of. He found a sign that looked like it was for a Go salon, but neither Waya nor Isumi was inside and none of the geezers showed any signs of understanding him, so he left and started asking another stranger again.

When he found himself next standing in front of the same building he had gone in with Waya, Isumi and Nase, he concluded that one of those characters in the line up along the top must be one for Go, and that was all that anyone had paid attention to. Stupid ignorant general public.

But maybe Nase was inside, and she could get in touch with Isumi for him. There wasn't any point going back to the station now that he knew where it was since he still didn't know what the right station to go to was.

There was a receptionist behind a counter on the first floor that Hikaru hadn't noticed the last time he was there when he went in. He formed a large, tentative smile, wondering if she could speak English, but she was talking into a phone and didn't even seem to know he was there. So he just slipped by with some relief and headed upstairs to look for Nase. He only hoped he could recognize her immediately considering he'd only met her the one time and he hadn't spent much of that time looking at her; despite looking almost totally Japanese himself, it was still kind of hard sometimes for him to distinguish one Asian face from another.

He wound up, after getting lost inside the building trying to find the room they'd used before, poking his head into a large long room that was full of kids playing Go against each other. He blinked and kept staring. Not quite what he'd expected when he followed the sound of voices. This many kids were this quiet all together--this many kids played Go? All in his rough age group? Why hadn't Waya and Isumi ever *said* instead of going out to play old geezers instead?

Unable to resist, Hikaru poked his head a little further through the doorway and studied the game going on closest to him. Both kids looked pretty good, as he got into his analyzing mindset and figured out the likely sequence of moves already played, but black was definitely beating the snot out of white. It looked like white's kid had gotten pushed onto the defensive and wasn't totally considering all his options anymore, which the black kid was naturally playing to his advantage. Hikaru shook his head. The ghost managed that against

him all the time; he had gotten expert at always looking for plays to let him hedge, wriggle away or, ideally, turn the tables completely with something totally wild. It was a lot easier to see those possibilities when he wasn't personally involved in the game, though.

The white kid, after a moment of hesitation, dipped his hand into his goke and slowly started to place his stone on a spot that would only dig him into a deeper mess in the long run. Hikaru grimaced.

The white kid paused and looked up at him, startled. Hikaru blinked back, then grinned sheepishly and shrugged. One little non-verbal critique wasn't interfering with the game, was it? Even though the kids could use it?

The white kid said something to the black one, who turned around and stared at him too. White said something else, he and black conversed shortly and rapidly, and then they both turned back to him. Black gestured peremptorily to the nearer empty side of the goban.

Surprised, but unable to infer any other meaning to that gesture, Hikaru slipped fully inside the room and sat down with them. Black spoke again in a decreeing tone--kind of funny considering he looked at least a few years younger than Hikaru--while pointing at Hikaru and then White's hand, which was still holding the stone.

"My advice?" Hikaru asked cheerfully, keeping his voice moderately low since there was an adult at the other end of the room bending over another game and all the kids seemed buried in their matches. "Well, look here, you were going to put your stone there, right?"

White and Black exchanged startled-bunny looks as soon as he started speaking English. This was why he'd thought it would be a good idea to go blond before moving, even though he looked Japanese; maybe people wouldn't be so surprised. But he was pointing liberally to illustrate as much as he could, and the two kids recovered quickly and White nodded.

"This is what's gonna happen if you do that--see, you keep a couple stones from getting lost here, all to the good, but then you get *creamed* over here just as soon as he puts a stone down in this spot. That's a heck of a lot more stones you just lost, pardon my bluntness. And it just gives him practically half the board in a few turns. Getting it? You probably really do know this already; it's embarrassing what just totally doesn't register in your mind sometimes, I know. You gotta get out of the rut of 'I'm gonna die.' Pretend you're him for a few minutes if it helps."

The bunny boys appeared to completely tune out what he was saying after the first couple minutes, but they paid riveted attention to the hands and consequences he laid out on the board. White looked like it had just registered that an eighteen-wheeler had missed hitting him by a second as Hikaru illustrated; Black never looked surprised. But at least he didn't look upset either. Maybe he got bored playing definitely winnable games too.

"Now, you *can* still come back from here, if you're smart enough. Try looking over here, he left a couple holes; sure, maybe they don't look important, but stick a stone in here, worm it a little deeper while he's busy mopping up the spots you already lost anyway--"

Getting such a complex sequence through to them required actually placing those stones as he talked, but the bunnies were hardly actually playing anymore anyway and it was easy enough to remember which exact few to take off again when he finished. The couple kids from the next closest goban apparently finished their game and started edging closer, looking curious.

"Then, bang, he's looking at your new territory and wondering what the heck just happened, now he's off-balanced for a few minutes while he's trying to figure it out, now *you* start pushing--here, or over here; heck, you've basically got a couple free moves while he's paranoid wondering if you're about to pull another rabbit out of the hat and playing it a little safer. That's not gonna last long, of course, then you're back to jab and punch like before, but now you're starting more level."

He sat back, satisfied with his lecture and conclusion, and took in the bunnies' evident states of comprehension. "Got it?"

Black and White stared at the board for a few minutes. White queried, Black answered; White pointed to one of Hikaru's stones, looked up at Hikaru, tentatively moved the stone over one space and looked at Hikaru again.

"Eh? Hm... yeah, that's not so bad, gives you the potential for an opening over here, but only if Black plays it right... he could counter like this, see? Then what do you do?"

Black seemed to like his counter, and nodded and smirked a little at White while the other boy pondered the new development. After a moment White reached down and placed a new stone against Black's intrusion.

"Well, maybe--"

Black promptly grabbed his own new stone and slapped it down to kill White's. Hikaru rolled his eyes, batted at both their hands before they could get overexcited and stop analyzing again, and scolded them when they both looked at him in astonishment. The other bunnies watched with huge, gleaming eyes.

"You morons, you both wanna die." Even playing tutoring the ghost would slice, dice, and bury them neatly side by side in under twenty minutes. Maybe these kids weren't so good at Go after all.

"Sit there, two minutes each, don't do anything but think. Consequences, man, consequences! Now look, you play like that, you can lose like this, and this, and this... and you, you play like that, you die even faster. He could kill you here, over here, over *here*..."

Both bunnies looked chagrined. White mumbled something and Black shifted around on his cushion uncomfortably.

Hikaru was suddenly interrupted from his instruction by the adult who had been at the other end of the room before abruptly looming over their goban and looking both surprised and suspicious. He said something at Hikaru. The bunnies started talking back in a jumble together, the other two adding in. Hikaru was surprised to see that quite a few other kids, while still sitting at their own gobans, seemed to have been paying a lot more attention to his game than their own.

Hikaru tried offering the man a weak smile. "Just helping out a little. Uh--" Finally, a useful and suitable Japanese word popped into his head when it drained of all else. "Gomen. Sorry."

The man said something again, while the bunnies were silent. He looked at Hikaru sternly.

"Really, I mean it. Gomen. Um... Nase?" he asked, reverting to his original purpose, barely remembering to tack the honorific "-chan" at the end. "Nase-chan? She here?"

The man humphed and said something to White that sent the kid scurrying out of the room, hopefully to locate Nase. If she was hopefully around. He knew Waya and Isumi weren't, because they were wherever he was supposed to be right now, and he didn't know anyone else to ask for. He didn't want to trust a bunch of grownups who didn't even understand him to somehow get him to an unknown address or in touch with one of the pathetically few people he could communicate with. So he just repeated "Nase-chan" whenever the man said anything to him, and waited under uncomfortable scrutiny until there was a brief stirring at the door and she finally, blessedly, appeared.

"Konnichiwa, Nase-chan!" Hikaru greeted with the cheerfulness of relief, jumping to his feet. "Sorry, I got lost trying to meet up with Waya and Isumi--they gave me these directions, but I couldn't find the right station--"

Nase looked at the paper he proffered, then laughed a little and said something to the man. He humphed and subsided from his guarding

of Hikaru a little, but he still didn't exactly look happy.

"Isumi-kun?" Nase asked Hikaru, indicating the paper.

"Yeah." He nodded eagerly. "Know how to get in touch with him? Tell him sorry I'm late and why I didn't make it and all?"

Nase glanced at a clock on the wall, still smiling, said something short to Hikaru and left with the paper still in her hand. Hikaru presumed she was going to find a phone or something. He hoped it wouldn't take her long.

"So..." He looked around, mostly dismissing the man and noting that pretty much all the kids had given up their games in favor of sitting and watching his sad little drama. "Anybody wanna play or anything?"

No reactions, of course, as none of them understood him. He tried pointing to Black and White's forgotten goban. "Game?"

The man looked at Hikaru sternly again, then summoned the bunnies back and set them up playing again. It didn't start back up very fast as both of them, presumably, started explaining everything Hikaru had shown them to the man. He grunted and settled down beside them, listening, looking like for the long run. Hikaru assumed this to be a subtle hint that he was not to go interfering like that with any more of the other kids, so he just wandered around the room and observed their games, smiling mutely whenever any of them glanced at him. A few of them he wished he could try playing himself, though.

Nase reappeared shortly, looking like she had just been laughing, and gestured Hikaru back to the doorway away from the other kids. She explained something to him that he couldn't understand a word of, but she didn't seem to be making any motions of leading him elsewhere or of whatever being particularly urgent. So Hikaru shrugged, figuring things would work themselves out eventually even

if he just went home, pointed to an unoccupied goban in the corner and asked, "Wanna play?"

The overseer looked up from the bunnies and addressed Nase almost distractedly; she answered, smiled at Hikaru, and led him to the goban. Hikaru settled down happily, not in seiza, and started focusing in with his hunt-and-kill survive-the-ghost mode. Game time.

He was wrapped up in the endgame battle, jockeying for the few points--moku--left available and pretty sure he was going to come out the winner overall, when he was suddenly distracted from the world on the board by a commotion at the door, and looked up just as Waya entered, followed immediately by Isumi. "Hey guys," he said vaguely, going back to his next stone. It annoyed him when Nase stood up to greet them rather than keeping her attention on the most important thing too.

"Shindo!" Waya said in a scolding tone, laughing and thumping him on the back. Then he leaned down to look at the game and asked a question.

"I'm white. Winning. You mind?" Hikaru returned, guessing the most likely answer.

"Shindo, how you come here?" Isumi asked, not laughing so openly but still obviously amused at his expense. "Wrong part town--study Go not even close!"

"Yeah, I kinda figured," Hikaru answered, grumpily trying to pull himself out of the game by telling himself he had already won anyway. "Seriously, you are so interrupting right now. Got mixed up with the station, that's all--could've sworn you said fifth stop, with the J-whatsits. Which station was it?"

Isumi translated quickly to Waya and Nase and, realistically, everybody else in the room again, especially the overseer, and then carefully repeated the correct station Hikaru was supposed to have

gotten off at. Hikaru didn't think it was very smart city planning to make different stops sound so similar and not have any other way of distinguishing them. Why couldn't they add signs in English, for instance, like there was so much Spanish stuff in America?

"No point go now," Isumi said when Hikaru had repeated the name several times to his satisfaction. "Try next week--you sure no need help?"

"I got it, I got it," Hikaru insisted, mildly annoyed by their doubting even though they had a tiny bit of justification. "I'll make it next time, I swear. Once could've happened to anyone. So have you guys eaten, or should I just head home now, the way the guy over there is giving me the eyeball?"

Isumi glanced back toward the overseer, who was definitely now looking at them pointedly. The man said something before turning away and directing all the kids back to their games, and Waya, Nase and Isumi started clearly getting ready to head out the door. Hikaru cleared off the goban of his white stones, returning them to their pot, so that at least the guy wouldn't have extra reason to be annoyed at him. Nase did the same with her black, and they made a quick exit.

"You be proud," Isumi told Hikaru outside, looking pleased. "Sensei say you not make so much trouble, you be good insei."

Sensei was teacher, even Hikaru knew that, and insei sounded similar, so maybe student? Did that mean he might be able to go back sometime and play some of the other kids?

"I didn't mean to make any trouble," he protested. "I was just showing a couple kids how they could play better."

Isumi translated. Waya and Nase both laughed.

The four stopped in a ramen shop for some quick bowls, and further laughter for the others while Hikaru wrestled with his chopsticks and finally started improvising increasingly ridiculous methods with no

more success, including wielding them as a double-pointed spear and one in each hand like drum sticks. He wound up drinking most of it since he refused to admit defeat and get them to ask for a spoon for him. Then they said goodbye, and he went home repeating the proper station name for 'study Go' several more times in his head.

A/N: Whew! Incredibly long single scene, but somehow it just wouldn't get shorter. I hope nobody minds too much. :) My little brother told me this seems like a filler chapter, and I'm a bit puzzled as to what to do about that, because I don't mean it to be one and things in it do lead to other events--one of which will be the start of the next chapter; I would have put it in here at the end except it's already so long. Oh well?

Let me know what you think, positive or negative, as always, and again, thanks for all the advice, comments, and questions which help me figure out how good a job I'm doing!

In which Hikaru finds study Go

A/N: Well, I'm still feeling a little loopy after having been sick for almost a week, but I've mostly recovered by now, I just haven't been able to write until yesterday. Thank goodness for the buffer chapters. :)

It surprises me how much I've learned about Japanese culture from reviewers since starting this story... which probably just shows how much I should've been researching on my own... I'm often lazy, though. :) I enjoy learning about Japanese culture from reviewers, almost as much I enjoy getting reviews. So keep them coming! As a special treat, first mention of a certain Touya prodigy in this chapter, and in the next the consequences of Hikaru's not learning Japanese start coming home to roost!

Stepping Stones

~ 7 ~ In which Hikaru succeeds in finding "study Go" ~

Far from being daunted by his failure to navigate the train system correctly, Hikaru had inadvertently discovered a new method of entertainment, since the only way he could interact with other people now was through Go. The next day that he was bored and had several hours of free time, he hopped on the train again, got off at a random station, and started accosting people with the painstakingly copied Go character. Maybe he wouldn't find that many salons, but it would help him get a little more familiar with the city, and now that he knew that other kids actually played Go he felt sufficiently motivated to see if he could run into any of them. Of course that non-salon building was the best place for that so far, but he didn't want to push his luck with the sensei overseer so soon.

He found one salon, poked his head in and failed to spot any kids or relatively young-looking geezers, so he skipped that one and tried

again from a different station. By evening he had two new salons committed to memory, and they could at least prove useful in showing Waya and Isumi since they only seemed to know the one. Geezers weren't that great, but it was more fun playing them when his friends were with him.

"You're late," his father complained when he got home. "Where have you been?"

Hikaru thought for a moment. "Wandering around Tokyo going up to complete strangers and begging for handouts." Of information.

His father gaped.

"Did you get anything, dear?" his mother asked mildly.

"Nothing really useful, but I've got hopes."

Hikaru paused when his directions led him to a residential neighborhood, wondering if he had somehow gone wrong again despite having found the signs this time, but finally shrugged and kept going. The directions changed from signs to a crude map of a line to follow there, maybe because it was a neighborhood. Maybe the "study Go" was at Waya or Isumi's house.

He completed the last short turn that left him standing in front of one particular house, but paused again before approaching it. They didn't seriously expect him to walk up to a house he'd never seen before and knock, hoping to be in the right place, when he couldn't even explain himself if it wasn't, did they?

Well, fine. If some Japanese total stranger answered the door he'd blame it all on Waya and Isumi and give the person their numbers to let them call and chew them out for it. Serve them right.

Waya answered the door promptly when he knocked. "Konnichiwa dude!" Hikaru said cheerfully, dismissing the punishments he had

only a moment ago been devising just in case. "See, told you I'd get here without any more problems! Score one for the American!"

Waya just rolled his eyes as Hikaru stepped in and kicked off his shoes, gesturing absently at the cubby where several other pairs had been put away. Either Waya had one weird collection he'd never mentioned before, or quite a few other guests. Then they went back through the house to a room full of about half a dozen adults, plus Isumi.

"Ohayo," Hikaru said, since formality seemed appropriate, before wondering if it still counted as morning. Nobody smirked at him, anyway.

"Ohayo," Isumi returned. "Congratulations, you here. This Morishita-sensei, who study Go--"

So did the guy study Go or was it his study-Go? Whatever the heck that was? Did that mean this wasn't Waya's house after all? That would explain the lack of a mother anywhere like in his own house... then Hikaru realized he had just missed all the other introductions. Oops. Well, they were all older than him, he could call them all sensei. That would be flattering too, wouldn't it?

"Ohayo," he repeated generally since he couldn't remember a 'nice to meet you' phrase. "Thanks for inviting me. So, what is it we're doing here? Just playing each other or what?"

Isumi paused before translating to the others, even though Hikaru thought he had been perfectly clear and concise. There was a chuckle from Morishita-sensei that seemed aimed at Waya and Isumi, brief discussion, and then Isumi translated Morishita's short statement, "You see now."

Hikaru shrugged and sat down. "Okay."

Hikaru didn't participate much at the beginning, except for playing a short life-and-death problem--tsumego--with one of the nameless

senseis when the rest of them got involved in some heated discussion around the main goban, but being there was a definite learning experience. 'Study Go,' he decided, meant Go study group, playing and analyzing games, and it was definitely Morishita's--probably also his house--him and his students and presumably-former students except for Isumi, who seemed to be there either only because Waya was his friend or only because of Hikaru. Hikaru was surprised to realize that Waya evidently considered Morishita his formal specific sensei. So other people had their own versions of ghosts in their backyard.

The younger members of the group seemed to have quite a bit of fun when Waya told them about Hikaru's tournament win (Hikaru guessed, since he caught the word "meijin") and, Isumi told him, Hikaru's experiences in the Go salon they'd taken him to. Isumi had to explain to him that most people didn't adjust so well to face-to-face games after only playing online; Hikaru couldn't imagine why, and said so. That set off another round of laughing chatter. Isumi told him, almost laughing himself, that the guy Kawai had been deliberately trying to offbalance Hikaru by being so outrageous, which new players were almost always susceptible to, and the old geezer after him had been doing his best to scare Hikaru into quivering submission.

Hikaru scoffed. The geezers in the tournament had been even worse, and he wouldn't even have noticed if he hadn't been so bored through most of it. And especially after playing Fuji so often, how could mere mortals' distractions be anything but pathetic? That was all Hikaru's had ever been when he tried them against the ghost.

"You should play online a little more often," he finally said with a shrug. "Some of those people are vicious."

Morishita suggested a game between Waya and Hikaru after being updated on the discussion, which Hikaru had no problem complying with. He was up on Waya 9-4 so far in their matches online. Morishita started either critiquing or coaching Waya a little ways in though, which started gradually but significantly improving his play,

making Hikaru laughingly complain about cheating. A couple of the guys started giving him their advice, using Isumi, who added his own. Hikaru took it all in but ignored most of it, and kept making steady progress despite Waya's resistance.

Then Waya's sensei told him something that turned out to be an unexpectedly brilliant tactic. Hikaru fumbled before he realized it, which Waya instantly pressed, so he took a moment to regroup his faculties and start considering as objectively as possible again. He didn't want to be forced onto the defensive. If this game was against the ghost, he'd have to be looking to weasel now--Waya wasn't anywhere near the ghost's level, but if Hikaru played as if he was, it could only be easier, and Waya wasn't used to his highest level of weaseling. He wouldn't be looking for it deep enough. And his sensei didn't know Hikaru's style at all, didn't even know how good he actually was after only seeing one ongoing game, so no problem there...

Hikaru played his hand and flubbed it badly, leaving his endangered cluster undefended. Waya's face lit up as his stones pounced in an unerring pincer. Hikaru's stones withered and died.

Ten hands later, Hikaru placed one more wild stone and his flub suddenly sprouted and chopped Waya's pincer in half. Everyone stared at the board in disbelief, then at him.

Hikaru tried to look innocent. "Gee, that was lucky," he murmured.

Isumi translated, looking slightly suspicious. Actually none of them looked very convinced, especially Morishita. Had he seen that possibility but discounted it because he figured Hikaru wasn't that devious or something?

Waya finally stopped gaping and turned back to the board with a growl, which just made Hikaru smirk. The trick mistake appeared to be as effective psychologically as it was strategically; now all Hikaru had to do was sit and ride the wave of doubt while Waya wondered just how much skill he had been hiding before and distracted himself

from his playing. Morishita's influence wasn't quite enough to save him in the end.

"You good. Think tricky," Isumi translated Morishita's pronouncement after the territory had been organized and moku tallied. "You learn only online?"

And in his backyard shed, Hikaru thought. But Isumi's English definitely wasn't up to explaining, or even necessarily understanding, that. He shrugged. "Yeah. There's this one guy I play a lot who's totally unbeatable."

Isumi translated again. Morishita looked at Hikaru intently, then shook his head and patted Hikaru's. "You beat Waya, Waya learn, good for Waya," Isumi translated. "Go good for you. You welcome come here many time."

"Gee, thanks." So the visitor pass turned into a permanent invitation-that must mean he'd impressed them. But while interesting, Hikaru still wondered exactly why any of them bothered forming a study group over Go. Maybe he'd find out after a while if he kept coming.

"Like see you play Touya-san," Isumi continued after a pause to assimilate Morishita's further comment. "Give him challenge."

"Touya?" Hikaru repeated, to be sure he had heard the name right. "Who's that?"

Everyone laughed or looked at each other, or both. Hikaru was annoyed. What, was he supposed to know who 'Touya' was? Oh, crap, that wasn't one of the guys in the group he'd missed the name of, was it?

Several of the other people started talking while Hikaru was trying to figure out how to repair that gaffe if he'd made it, and how to find out if he had. Waya and Isumi started talking to them in an explaining tone, and everyone paid attention to them. It was annoying to guess that they were talking about him and not have any idea what it was

they were saying. He couldn't defend or explain himself, or even contribute a joke.

"We meet you Touya-san," Isumi finally told him, while Waya went on talking and Hikaru noticed that several people were evincing disbelief. It sounded like Waya was repeating something again.

Well, at least Touya wasn't one of the guys in the room.

"Uh, sure. Whatever."

Morishita clapped his hands and the conversation died down, though Hikaru still had no idea what it was about; then shortly everyone was saying goodbyes and otherwise getting ready to go. Hikaru decided to interrogate Isumi on the way to the train station and find out.

"Insei, online," Isumi said dismissively after a slight pause when he asked. "Just Go."

"*Real* helpful," Hikaru muttered. Waya laughed at him, said something, and knuckled his head before he could duck. Hikaru mimed punching him in the gut. Isumi shook his head tolerantly as the younger two started to wrestle while walking and sighed something that was probable a Japanese version of, "Boys."

A situation formed in a game against the ghost that offered a perfect opportunity to try the same trick Hikaru had played against Waya. He did so, trying to act nonchalant instead of holding his breath while he waited for Fuji to react.

The ghost frowned as it regarded the board. It looked up at him suspiciously. He tried even harder to act normal, which probably wasn't completely convincing since he never paid attention to how he normally acted.

The fan reached out, descended... and tapped a spot that killed his deep-set trap before it could even form.

Hikaru sighed as he placed the stone for it. Maybe this was why Go salons were appealing--because you could win in them. Beating the ghost's game was going to take years.

In which Hikaru attends a Go convention

Stepping Stones

~ 8 ~ In which Hikaru attends a Go convention ~

Hikaru's father hung up the phone just as his mother got back from picking up groceries. He stood there for a moment afterward, hand still on the receiver, rather than moving on to something else, acting on the call, or putting it out of his mind.

"Who was it?" his mother asked, taking in her husband's grim expression.

"Hikaru's school," he said after a moment, with great control. "His Japanese teacher, specifically."

His mother grimaced faintly. "How bad is it?"

"Apparently," each word was now being pronounced precisely and individually, "after five months in this country, our son is averaging a D."

His mother sighed, and moved on to put up the groceries. "I'll talk to him."

"Talk is cheap," his father growled. "This has gone beyond patience. He refuses to adapt."

"Well..." It was hard for his mother to argue with that, but she gave it a try. Her husband and son never managed to see things from each other's perspective. "He's happy, though, honey; he's even made friends."

"Friends who will hold his hand for the rest of his life when he needs to get a job? Get into a decent college? Enter the workforce as anything above a janitor?" his father snorted. "Hikaru doesn't need

friends right now. He needs language. I'm going to see that he finally learns it."

His mother pursed her lips, but said nothing more.

"You not busy today?" Isumi asked over the phone just as Hikaru had been considering calling him.

"No, not really," Hikaru said, muting the song playing on his laptop. "What's up?"

"Waya and I find Go... meeting," Isumi explained after a distinct pause of searching for the word. "You want come?"

"Go meeting?" Surely that wasn't what it sounded like, the dry around-the-table droning that his father muttered about from work. How was it different from the Go study group? Couldn't that be called a Go meeting too? "Yeah, sure, I guess. Where is it?"

It couldn't hurt to check it out; Waya and Isumi weren't the types to go to something really boring voluntarily. And Hikaru had been about to suggest they visit one of the salons he'd discovered anyway since he had nothing else to do, one in particular that had promptly burned into his memory as having both another kid and one capable of at least rudimentary English.

He met up with the other two successfully at the correct location half an hour later, and walked with them into what turned out to resemble a convention center like he had once visited in America with his mom when he was younger. A convention filled to every wall with rows of tabletop gobans for people playing, stalls with Japanese people hawking what looked like everything from Go books to Go posters, and a large projection screen displaying a game in progress for all those interested to see.

"Cool!" Hikaru exclaimed involuntarily, surprised and impressed. He'd never imagined this many people were even interested in Go.

And enough to put all this together for no other reason, like comic book conventions and sci fi conventions...?

There was even a line of computers in kiosks where people were playing Go online. Hikaru started weaving through the crowd toward those, interested to see if he could recognize any screen names from NetGo and connect them to faces even though he couldn't communicate with any of those people. Waya and Isumi followed amusedly.

The computers weren't far from some of the stalls, and Hikaru shortly became involved in figuring out what each one was offering, mostly with the other two's help. He found himself wishing that Japanese wasn't even harder to read than it was to speak as they explained what several strategy books displayed focused on, all of them sounding interesting if only they were printed in English versions. There were gobans and sets of stones, apparently of varying material and quality although even the translated specifics didn't mean much to Hikaru; there were videos, T-shirts, food and all kinds of random little trinkets and souvenirs like paper fans and plastic keychains. The books were the only things that lingered in Hikaru's mind. But they were worthless to him as they were.

"We pick simple one," Isumi insisted, helping Waya drag him back toward the book stalls after they noticed he kept glancing that way. "Help you learn read. Learn Go more."

Hikaru gave up protesting after a final token resistance and grumble that they'd better not expect him to pay. Then he just had to try not to look pleased as they debated, presumably over which one was simplest, and wait for his free book. It occurred to him that he might should feel guilty, since it really would be useless to him. But he couldn't resist the appeal of being able to get something without paying for it himself.

"You want Meijin or Oza?" Isumi asked after he and Waya seemed to have narrowed the judging down.

"Huh? Meijin? You don't mean there's something about that tournament I won in there?"

Isumi laughed, as well as Waya when Isumi translated to him. (Waya of course laughed harder.) "Professional Meijin," Isumi then explained patiently. "Professional Oza."

"Oh, yeah, right." Meijin was a title, so Oza probably was too, and the guys who had the titles had written books about what they did. Of course. "Are they about them or about the Go?"

After deciphering the question Isumi assured him, "Go."

"Makes no difference to me then, I've never heard of either one of them. Guess they're probably like celebrities to serious game fans, huh?"

Waya choked when Isumi translated. When Hikaru demanded why he just waved him off, still gasping, and finally straightened with recurring snickers and an unerasable smirk. Sometimes Hikaru despised being the odd one out.

"Oh sure, laugh clown laugh," he said haughtily. "You guys go bug off and do your own thing for once. I'll see you around."

Isumi stopped suppressing his own smile and looked at Hikaru in surprise. Waya questioned him. Isumi had the graciousness not to answer immediately and let Waya feel what it was like to stew in ignorance.

"You sure?" Isumi asked dubiously.

"Totally," Hikaru maintained. "G'wan, see ya. We'll run into each other eventually anyway."

Still looking unconvinced, Isumi told Waya. Waya stopped smirking and looked at Hikaru incredulously. He queried Isumi. Isumi shrugged and answered briefly, then told Hikaru, "Okay."

The other two slowly moved off into the crowd, not before paying for and handing Hikaru his new book. Since he didn't have his everpresent backpack with him for once, Hikaru just held it in one hand as he left the stall and started wandering around, looking for anything else to catch his eye.

He stopped and stared for several minutes in fascination over one game in the corner, between a big animated guy and a sweating older guy. Every stone on the board was white, yet it appeared to be a standard two-player game. Yes--they were both playing the same color. How did that work? Were they actually both keeping straight who placed every stone in their heads while putting more down? How hard was that?

The sweater--and apparently the challenger--gave up and rose, shaking his head. He hurried away with an expression a lot like relief while the big guy laughed and swept the stones off the board. Then he turned to Hikaru and, gesturing to the goban as he addressed him, presumably invited him to try his luck.

"Well... it looks fun," Hikaru admitted, sidling closer but hesitating before actually taking the chair. "I don't have to pay or anything do I? I didn't bring much--" He half-pulled out his yen wallet, and the big guy laughed and waved it away, so Hikaru relaxed and sat down opposite him. "So am I white or... black-white?" he asked, purely business. This would take a whole different level of concentration from just playing the ghost to do well.

The guy pushed one pot of white stones toward him and gestured for him to put one down, so Hikaru settled into the mindset of black. He went first and the other guy had a five-and-a-half komi to theoretically start them even.

Figuring he might as well wing the whole thing since it was going to be such a challenge anyway, Hikaru placed his first stone in the very center of the board, the most strategically insane opening move possible. The big guy laughed heartily and slapped his own stone down without even seeming to pay attention to where he did.

While a challenge, white-only Go turned out not to be as impossible as Hikaru had first thought it might. It just required focus so absolute to keep every stone in mind that his surroundings, his opponent, and everything but the board in front of him faded completely from his attention.

And the guy he was playing was good besides just being more familiar with the style; distinctly better than Hikaru, actually. He was vaguely surprised by that after most of the people he had faced so far in person, estimating that this guy would probably be at the Elite level in the online classifications. Hikaru knew better than to play Elite very often; he wasn't that good yet. Of course, the ghost was Elite minimum, and Hikaru played it at least every other day, so that didn't say much for his common sense anymore...

"Crap," he sighed in disappointment when the game was definitely over, his loss. "That was fun, I just forgot about guarding my shape over here, and then I didn't see soon enough when you--" Then he paused, having automatically started to dissect his play after having been introduced to the concept before remembering that his opponent couldn't understand a word he was saying.

The big guy just said something back, though, which Hikaru couldn't understand a word of either, and they conducted the post-game discussion anyway just as if what they were saying meant something to the other, two one-sided trains of thought verbalized together in turn. Hikaru felt pleased at the end when he rose to go and the big guy shook his hand and ruffled his hair heartily (except about the hair part). Why couldn't other Go fans be that nonchalant about playing with a foreigner? This was proof that language didn't really make a difference if people didn't let it. Pity he'd probably never get to play that guy again.

He stopped in his wandering and watched the main rows of players for a few minutes, trying to judge how good most of them were and if he felt like getting in with them. It might be a mini tournament rather than just a casual open set of tables for anyone who wanted to sit down and play each other.

"Wanna try--" he started to ask, before remembering that Waya and Isumi weren't with him anymore. Well, he could track them down if he wanted; the convention center wasn't that big...

A shout from behind interrupted him, and he turned to see the big white-only guy huffing up waving the book Hikaru had just gotten and forgotten about. He must have left it at the table.

"Oh, thanks," he exclaimed, taking it as the guy reached him. Next time he was bringing his backpack. "Hey, can anybody play there?" He pointed to the main floor and then to himself to make his question clear.

The big guy laughed, as though he had said something funny, and steered him away toward the milling-crowd area with brisk purpose. Hikaru let him since he wasn't heading toward an exit and he was curious about what the guy had in mind.

The guy stopped and looked around when they got off the main pathway, then shouted what sounded like a name, presumably having spotted someone. Somebody else Hikaru could play? Somebody who could take care of setting him up with the other players?

A boy appeared through the crowd apparently in response to the call, then stopped and stared when his gaze landed on Hikaru. Hikaru was already staring back, surprised but hardly displeased. What a coincidence! The same kid he had met in that Go salon, who he'd been planning on playing again!

"Akira-kun!" the big guy boomed again, and the kid shook it off and came over to them, greeting the big guy politely even though he almost barely stopped staring at Hikaru to do so. The big guy slapped Hikaru on the back while rattling something off; the kid-- Akira (why did all the names he heard sound girly?)--answered, then, rather than trying to interpret, turned to Hikaru and asked simply, "Play?"

A/N: Don't kill me! I know, I know, I said the actual consequences of not learning Japanese would start this chapter, but this scene wound up so long I decided to chop it in half and make two chapters of it, so that will have to come after. Hikaru's dad will need a little time to set it up. ;) And please don't kill me for Akira's surprise appearance either; next chapter he'll be a full character, I promise, and it'll explain him and Hikaru meeting. I couldn't resist the cliffhanger. :D

Happy spring break for those of us on it right now!... As it comes to an end...

In which Hikaru discovers pro Go

A/N: Aaand here we go, the proper introduction of Touya Akira! :) I got up ungodly early yesterday morning and brainstormed the future of this fic rather than doing my math homework, so even though I still don't know the ending you may all rest assured that updates will continue regularly for quite a while minimum. The story might be veering a little off track for a while though--I can't seem to manage the whole learning Japanese thing otherwise.

Reviews put big idiotic smiles on my face and I need the mood boost since I now have to go do my math homework, so please review! And if anyone would like to volunteer to learn calculus for me and take all my tests... sigh...

Stepping Stones

~ 9 ~ In which Hikaru discovers professional Go ~

Hikaru grinned widely at the other boy. "You bet."

The big guy laughed and waved them toward the area where his white-only goban was. Hikaru hoped he had a pot of black stones somewhere; he didn't want his second ever game against Akira to have to be one color. He wanted to play his absolute best, without even the distraction of having to adjust to a different appearance on the board. On the way to the table it occurred to the boys, as it hadn't last time, to mention to one another that they were Hikaru and Akira. Then they reached it and promptly got down to business.

Playing Akira the first time, when Hikaru had made the happy discovery of a kid his own age in one of the random salons he'd found, had been in a way like getting hit with a shock of cold water. Hikaru had developed the habit of comparing his opponents' skill levels to the ghost's--never had he consciously done so with his own

level. With Akira he'd realized that for the first time, because Akira's level was just a notch higher than his own, an astonishingly close level compared to the few other kids Hikaru had played in person. He'd lost by only six points, half a point if the komi had been reversed.

He played the ghost all the time because he wanted to beat its level *someday* ; against the ghost that wasn't going to come any sooner. But against Akira--against Akira he thought he just might be able to beat him *this* day if he tried hard enough, fully applied himself. He wanted to beat Akira's game *now*, and now he had the unexpected opportunity to do so. He wasn't going to waste it.

They waged battle in black and white for at least an hour--although Hikaru never looked up at a clock--before the game finally concluded, and Hikaru sat back with an unwilling but satisfied sigh. This time he had lost by only four points. Now he knew for sure he could possibly beat Akira next time, and had an even firmer resolve of doing so; he'd push and push himself until he did. Maybe his new Go book would even help if he got his dad to help him decipher it.

Akira also paused before starting to clear the board, as though reluctant to erase all the evidence of their excellent match immediately. Hikaru was in no bigger hurry. He felt like showing it off to someone, bragging, even though he had been the loser, except that there was no one to brag to except the winner and that would be just stupid.

"We play again?" Akira asked, paying close and careful attention to each word he pronounced, when they finally put their stones away together. "You come to salon again?"

"Definitely," Hikaru promised--maybe bring Waya and Isumi too, like he'd first intended. Although they definitely wouldn't be able to beat Akira. "Hai. When are you there?"

Akira considered before offering, "Weekend."

Hikaru nodded. "Okay. Hai. Next weekend, I'll be there. Saturday?"

"Hai," Akira agreed. Then he glanced around and asked, "You come to see match?"

"Uh, not any one in particular," Hikaru said, shrugging. "Just to look around. See everything. Is there a special match? Important match?"

Akira seemed to hesitate a little, then noticed Hikaru's again-forgotten book and pointed to it. "You know of Meijin?"

"That who wrote it?" he asked absently, glancing down at it. "I know it's a title, that's all. Really good player, right?"

Akira smiled slightly. "Yes. Good player. Meijin play here today."

"Really? Wow." Hikaru blinked. "Yeah, let's go see then. You know where?"

Akira nodded, moving away from the table. Hikaru barely remembered to grab his book before following. "Hai. Screen show. See in next room better."

The next room, which Hikaru hadn't even known was there, proved to be where the meijin and his opponent were actually playing. Spectators were apparently free to watch but couldn't get right up to the goban and were all being very quiet. Hikaru wondered why Akira thought they could see better from the edge of the room rather than on the main floor with the big screen and commentator; then Akira started working his way closer through the people watching and Hikaru felt someone grab his arm and was pulled just outside back into the lobby area.

"Shindo!" Isumi exclaimed, Waya right beside him. "Still good? See Meijin?"

"Yeah, yeah, seeing meijin," Hikaru agreed, shrugging his arm out of Waya's grasp. "'Course I'm fine. Oh, hey--"

"Hikaru?" Akira called, reappearing at the doorway and stopping there when he saw Hikaru with a couple other boys.

"Touya!" Waya exclaimed, sounding like he would be strangling if he wasn't so shocked.

"I thought it was Akira," Hikaru said, confused, turning to him.

"Touya Akira-san," Isumi told him distractedly. "You know Touya-san, Shindo?"

"Yeah, we just met up again," Hikaru explained.

At the same time Akira said, "We play at salon."

"Oh," Isumi said, a little helplessly. Then he suddenly seemed to find something funny as he said, "Amateur Meijin meet Meijin son--who win?"

"Amateur Meijin?" Akira repeated.

"Meijin's son?" Hikaru repeated.

"I win," Akira added.

"Barely," Hikaru clarified. "Wait 'til next time."

Isumi looked like he was definitely suppressing amusement. Waya was slowly turning red in the background. Isumi took pity on him and started explaining what everyone else was saying.

"You Amateur Meijin?" Akira asked, turning to Hikaru, sounding moderately impressed but not totally surprised like most geezers.

"Apparently. By accident really," Hikaru admitted, shrugging. "You're the guy in there meijin's son? The pro one? Whoa, that must be weird. No wonder you're good though. Must play a lot, huh?"

"Hai. My father teach me," Akira nodded. "Who teach you?"

"Er..." Nobody, the people he'd played at the very beginning, the people he lost against, a ghost. "... Online games. Online sensei. I'm from America; Go's not as big there." A memory suddenly struck him and he turned to Isumi and asked without thinking, "Hey, Akira's that Touya you guys said I should challenge at the study group, huh?"

Isumi looked up, startled, blinked and swallowed. "Ano... yes," he admitted, glancing at Akira and then away from him. "Sensei say be good match."

"Morishita-sama?" Akira asked, apparently unconscious of any rudeness or any such thing. "He have good judgment. We have good game."

Waya muttered something that Isumi didn't translate. Isumi jabbed him with his elbow and nodded, smiling. "You lose?" he double-checked, turning to Hikaru.

"*Barely*," Hikaru insisted. "Only by four points. Four moku."

"Four moku is close," Akira agreed. "No handicap."

Handicap? Handicaps playing Go? How could you handicap a board game?

"Very good," Isumi said, sounding impressed. "Touya-san very good," he added to Hikaru.

"Duh," Hikaru agreed. Akira was the best player he'd met so far in his age range--though, granted, so far the only others he'd played were Waya, Isumi and Nase. But at least a few of his online opponents were other kids, and they didn't compare either.

"Are you insei?" Akira asked him, with a slight gesture that might have been toward Waya and Isumi.

"Huh? Uh... no, not really. I guess. You'd be your dad's insei, huh?"

Akira gave him a weird look. Isumi quickly explained something to him in Japanese, which Hikaru generously chose to assume was only for the convenience of fluency and brevity instead of letting it bother him. Waya joined in. Akira stared at them.

Then he swiveled around and stared at Hikaru as he demanded, "You *understand* insei?"

"Uh..." Hikaru glanced around at their faces. "... Apparently not?"

"Insei try to become professional Go player," Akira explained very slowly and deliberately. "I try to become professional Go player. You try too, yes?"

"You guys want to go pro? In Go ?" Hikaru repeated incredulously. "But--what--as a *career* ?"

"Why not become professional when you are so good?" Akira demanded.

"People don't *do* that!" Hikaru protested, unable to form a more logical argument. Go was like chess, wasn't it--sure, there were technically a few people who did it for a living, but not *real* ones. Real people just played as a hobby. And they *all three* wanted to get in there--wanted to play Go for a living? Were they serious? Could they even get any money from it?

"Wait--you think *I* could go pro? Seriously?" he asked, dumbfounded. One more revelation on top of everything else. It just made the rest seem even more unreal. "C'mon, get real. It's a game. Nobody plays games for a living, except like maybe poker. But--"

"Go like poker," Isumi suggested.

"But--" Hikaru repeated feebly.

"Come." Akira grabbed his arm and started marching off toward the main room. He led the three to one of the unoccupied computers,

quit the Go website, and brought up what looked like a search engine in Japanese. He clicked on a page that looked like currency exchange rates and studied it for a second while he spoke.

"My father is Meijin," he said with calm persistence. "He make over one-hundred thousand American dollar every year."

Hikaru gaped at him.

"Meijin is one of seven title," Akira went on inexorably. "Meijin, Kisei, Honinbo, Gosei, Jyudan, Tengen, Oza. Every one make over fifty thousand American dollar. Every year new match for every title. Japanese Go Association have over one-hundred professional Go player. Every year there is test, three new professional Go player. They teach, play, study--Go is their job. China, Korea have many more player."

Hikaru was at an utter loss. A *hundred thousand* dollars. A *hundred plus* pro players, in *one* country. All for Go.

And they said he could be a pro too...

"I..." he finally tried. His voice cracked. He swallowed, and lost whatever he had to say, not that he'd had anything. He seemed to be speechless. Well, thoughtless. "It..."

Finally he cleared his throat again and squeaked, "You sure? Really?"

Wayu, Isumi and Akira all nodded seriously at him.

"Wayu and I insei," Isumi reiterated, slightly apologetically. "You better. Touya-san above insei. You almost same. You can be professional."

"But..."

"Why not?" Akira demanded, practically boring into him with his stare. "I will become professional, play better player, become better."

Will you fall behind? Will we not play again?"

"You won't get better than me!" Hikaru automatically yelped indignantly. "Just you watch! I'll--stop that! Stop pushing! Look, this is all just weird, okay? What's the rush? Why can't I just think about this and get used to it?"

"Do," Akira said, nodding decisively. "But soon. I will not wait."

Hikaru bristled, but refrained from escalating that argument even though it was begging for it. He *would* beat Akira, period. Being a pro or not had nothing to do with that.

"What about that amateur Meijin thing?" he asked carefully a moment later. "How big a deal is that, really?"

Isumi looked thoughtful for a moment. "For amateur, as high as can," he offered.

Hikaru blew out his breath in a silent sigh. So. He was already at the top level of recognition in Japan without going pro, and his friends, the ones he thought he was just hanging out with sharing a common interest, were all aiming to go higher. Couldn't he still play them like now even if they did? What was all this seriousness?

But he could go pro too. He could make playing a game a career, supposedly. He could get money for it. He could get *paid* for playing a game, *really*...? Paid enough to live on?

"But we're just kids," he pointed out. "We're too young to be getting jobs, so what does it matter now?"

"No age limit on professional Go," Akira said flatly. "Youngest Japanese was eight."

Eight . Hikaru gawked. A pro player, earning money, at *eight* ?

"Okay," he said finally, shaking his head. "I'm gonna go home now. This is too much all at once. I'm just--I'll see you guys around, okay?"

And you, you're still gonna be at the salon on Saturday, right? You're not ducking out of our match because of this?"

"I will be there," Akira said, dark eyes snapping. "I will win."

"We'll just see about that," Hikaru threatened. "See ya, Waya, see ya, Isumi--"

"Shindo!" Isumi called just as he started to make his exit. "Where book?"

Hikaru stopped and looked down blankly at his empty hands. Crap. Then he sighed and turned back resignedly. "Okay, fine, I'm going home *after* I find that stupid thing *again* . Don't suppose any of you'd like to help...?"

In which Hikaru's father takes action

A/N: Here we go, the first chapter into the double digits, featuring Hikaru's American friends once again (finally) and, for the first time... *drum roll* a scene from someone besides Hikaru's point of view! (Yes, very shocking, very dramatic, thank you, you may applaud.) From here on out, Sai's role finally starts getting bigger, too--in fact, next chapter he actually manages to get Hikaru to call him Sai. :D

As always let me know what you think please, everybody, about Akira in particular--it's been so long in this fic since I've stepped out of Hikaru's head that I'm not sure how well I was able to step into someone else's. Thank you all so much for so many reviews last chapter! Oh, and for AnonXMan, who asked about Akira and Hikaru's game... *scratches head* well, it doesn't really matter who was black and who was white, so take your pick? :) Onward!

EDIT: Sorry for the false alarm people, just had to fix a small mistake I made at the end of the chapter--apparently Japanese numbers *are* the same as American ones. Yeah, shows how much I know. :P

Stepping Stones

~ **10** ~ In which Hikaru's father drops a bombshell ~

"Oi, Fuji," Hikaru called determinedly when he finally finished hooking up the line of extension cables leading through the backyard and lugged his laptop into the dusty shed. "C'mere! I told some people you were my sensei online, so you gotta start playing just in case I ever need to point to some games. Here Fuji! Go! You wanna try playing some new opponents?"

The ghost hovered interestedly at his shoulder as Hikaru settled his laptop on the goban and logged onto the Internet. It asked several

questions that didn't sound remotely understanding while Hikaru brought up NetGo.

"Alright, let's pick your username and password... crap, Fuji's taken. Let's add some numbers then... um, go is like five in Japanese, right? So Fuji-five... Fuji-five-five-five... oh c'mon morons; so much for being clever. All right, never mind. Jaro. *Ha !* Jaro you are!"

The ghost failed to appreciate that small triumph properly, but Hikaru didn't care. He typed in the same password he used for his account, registered the new user, and headed to the Go boards. He picked an Experienced player for Fuji's/Jaro's first match. No reason to start at the top and make waves from a sudden appearance; they could build up there over a few weeks or so.

Fuji squealed with excitement when the nineteen-by-nineteen lines came up, with virtual black and white stones ready to be placed. Its fan danced in front of the screen in enthusiasm until Hikaru batted at it and laughed, "Yeah, yeah, settle down before you hyperventilate. This is like Go in a magic box, okay? Look, you're playing somebody all the way over in Korea. Exotic Go. Now c'mon, you get to go first. You're black. Get to it!"

The fan vibrated gently as the ghost hummed its indecision, then whisked at one of the intersections of lines in the bottom right corner. Hikaru clicked and placed the stone. The ghost squealed again, and again when the first white stone appeared. Then it narrowed in and started playing Go. White didn't stand a chance.

Fuji pouted and begged several hours and four games later when Hikaru stretched, glanced outside, and logged off. The ghost was insatiable now that it had been presented with the magic limitless Go box. Hikaru almost regretted the introduction.

"Tomorrow, okay?" he promised, already focusing on what activity he felt like after sitting on the floor for so long clicking a mouse. Kicking around his soccer ball, maybe; it'd been a while since he'd really done that. He could use the practice. "I'll let you play again

tomorrow, but not forever. We don't want to make a big deal of this. Really you should be grateful you've gotten to play anybody else at all; you live in a shed, in case you haven't noticed."

The ghost pouted again but seemed to believe his promise even if it couldn't understand the words. Hikaru thought briefly about bringing a basic English phrase book in sometime, but really could a ghost actually learn something, and did he want to risk it getting any more pestering than it already was?

What? Jamal posted. **What*?*

You're kidding, Trey posted. And without a gaping face emoticon.

It's not that big a deal, Hikaru typed defensively. *Turns out there's this pretty big Go world over here, could even make money in it, so why not think about it? 'S'not like I'm committed to anything yet.*

*But it *would* be a commitment, Hikaru,* Ami posted. *Are you really sure you want that? It's just a game. A hobby. You really want to play a hobby for the rest of your life?*

Hey, playing Go doesn't mean I can't do anything else, Hikaru insisted. *Besides, Go's pretty much all I do anymore anyway. There's nothing else to do.*

That blows, man, Jamal posted.

*I *like* Go,* Hikaru posted, irritated despite the sympathy meant. *Seriously, what's the big deal? It's just something I'm thinking about. I don't even know what it's really about yet. What's with you guys?*

*What's with *you*, Ru?* Trey posted back immediately. *You never would've actually thought about this before. You said you weren't getting into Japanese culture at all over there.*

*I'm not, which is why Go is the only thing I have to do, Hikaru fired back. And I kinda like the idea of playing it all day. Why not get some money for it while I'm at it? Turns out I'm *really good*, guys. I can go pro.*

Shut up and calm down, everyone, Ami posted. Okay, Ru. We're not trying to criticize, we're just surprised. It's weird to think about. It doesn't seem like you. There's not any time limit on you deciding this, is there?

No, Hikaru posted, refraining from adding anything else.

Then it's no big deal, Ami posted. *We can get used to it, and you can look into it logically, and we can all get back to each other. We're still your friends. We want to support you.*

Gee, thanks, Hikaru typed, but hesitated before hitting Enter to post it. Instead he backspaced, paused again, and then only typed, *Yeah.*

"So, how's your Japanese?" his father asked over dinner, after having been unusually quiet since he got home.

Hikaru shrugged his shoulders uncomfortably. "Okay, oto-san."

"At least you're being more honest," his father muttered, utterly ignoring his use of what Hikaru knew was the proper term for father. Then he announced, out of the blue, "We've been beyond patient with you giving you time to adapt, Hikaru. You're not trying hard enough. Starting next week you'll be going to a proper Japanese school from now on."

Hikaru's fork dropped with a clatter. " *What ?*" he protested, aghast. "You can't mean--not a Japanese school like where they all speak Japanese? Dad! *I can't understand Japanese !* "

"This will give you no other choice but to learn," his father said, immovable. "It's the only option left, Hikaru. You can't stay helpless

in your new country."

"Mom," Hikaru turned and begged to her. "Tell me he's joking. My grades will be sunk, my homework will be pointless, I won't *learn* anything--I'll *die* ! Please, Mom!"

"I'm sorry, honey, I know it'll be hard," his mother said sympathetically but without remorse, proving her ability to utterly turn off all human empathy when needed. "But you are young enough to adapt. And you will learn Japanese this way, much faster."

Hikaru just kept staring at her, unable to believe that his only ally had turned against him so completely. *She* wasn't the one switching schools to an environment where she'd be an alien. Easy for her to say 'sorry you can do it.'

"Next week?" he finally whispered, after working his mouth for several moments without producing any sound.

His father nodded firmly. "I've already finalized the transfer."

Next week. He'd be dead. He rose from the table and drifted away to his room, no longer hearing or seeing anything beyond his scrambled thoughts. Of all the things he'd thought could be the worst his parents would ever do to him... this was going to be a living, waking, unending nightmare. If only the world would end before Monday...

Akira was running a bit late Saturday when he got to his father's Go salon, expecting Hikaru would probably be there waiting on him like last week. He had an apology formed and ready as he entered, but it died away as he came to a stop inside, puzzled, and took in the other boy slumped over the goban from his chair, head turned to one side, muttering faintly.

"Hikaru?" he asked carefully in the other boy's tongue, approaching. "Are you ready to play?"

His answer was a muffled groan. "Tell me something, Akira, how is it you talk English better every time I hear you?"

Akira shrugged a little, uncertain how to answer. "We learn it in school. Since I meet you, I study it more."

"I *hate* you."

Akira blinked. He knew quite a few of the inseis didn't like him, but he had never had that said directly to him. And he had thought he and Hikaru were getting along quite well--Hikaru was the one who had started the first-name, no-honorific basis. Even if he was not really familiar with Japanese culture.

"I am sorry to hear that," he finally said. "Do you want to still play?"

Another groan, and what sounded like a complaint about his head. Akira refrained from pointing out that he still couldn't understand if Hikaru didn't speak slowly and clearly enough.

"Hikaru?" he asked again after another moment passed. Catching something indistinct, he leaned closer, and was surprised to hear that Hikaru seemed to be muttering a string of random everyday words in Japanese in completely nonsensical order.

Growing concerned, he stepped back and went into the salon's private office behind the reception counter, where he picked up the phone and dialed the Go Institute's number, the only useful one he could recall off the top of his head.

"Good morning. This is Touya Akira," he told the receptionist on the other end when she answered. "Are there any insei in today named Waya-san or Isumi-san? I'd like to speak with one of them."

The receptionist promised to go find out, and Akira waited through a brief pause until there was a click of the phone on the other end being picked up again. A slightly suspicious voice asked, "Touya?"

"Waya-san?" Akira guessed, and received a grunt as an answer. "This is about H--Shindo-san. He's at my father's salon for our game, but I think he might be sick or something."

"Shindo, sick?" The other boy suddenly sounded more alert. "He's never even had the sniffles as long as I've known him. What's wrong with him?"

"I'm not sure. He's not moving or speaking much, and he doesn't want to play." He hesitated a little before continuing, but then did so anyway. "I thought you might have a better idea what to do since you know him better."

"If Shindo totally isn't interested in Go, better take him to the hospital," Waya predicted. "But he ought to be fine. He's probably just in some mood--gets a little sulky every now and then. Just badger him until he gives in and starts talking again."

A faint sound came from the other end of the line and Waya paused distractedly, then spoke into the phone again, "Look, I've gotta get back before I forfeit. Don't worry about Shindo. But if he *is* sick, get him to a hospital and let me know *right then*, or else. Oh, and tell him he's in big trouble if he skips sensei's study group again without saying anything when he was supposed to be there!"

The other end clicked and turned into a dial tone, and Akira slowly replaced the phone in its cradle, wondering vaguely how Hikaru made such friends that they could be so threatening for him when he couldn't even talk directly with them. But then Akira knew that for whatever reason, possibly just because he was so good in Go, Waya seemed to particularly dislike him. Making friends was never a skill that Akira had learned.

"Okay, Hikaru," he said calmly in English, returning to the main room, determined not to lose this one through incorrect handling--which was, apparently, his usual handling: polite. "What is wrong?"

Hikaru just mumbled. Akira sat down beside him, ignoring the lack of welcome, and asked again, "What did happen?"

Hikaru moaned. "I *hate* Japanese."

Akira blinked. That sounded much like how Hikaru had said he hated Akira, except more genuine. Good. Then Hikaru didn't actually hate him, just hated his being Japanese.

... That seemed a little racist.

"Why?"

"Because it's *impossible* !"

Akira wondered if he should point out that Hikaru seemed to have picked up at least a dozen new words already judging from his muttering. But since when had he started muttering random Japanese words in the first place? Hikaru was the most un-Japanese boy Akira had ever met.

"What did happen?" he repeated patiently.

All of a sudden Hikaru jerked up from his unmoving slump and finally answered, a rapid outpouring of frustration and wild gesticulations being let out which Akira could barely get the gist of. School, Japanese, horrible... Hikaru was attending a *Japanese school* ? He couldn't even communicate with Japanese!

"I *hate* my father," he finally ended with vicious fervency, staring with narrowed glassy eyes into nothing. " *Hate* him. I'm dying, and I want to kill someone, and I never want to go back ever --"

Akira sat back a little and took quick and careful estimation of the other boy's evident volatile state. He'd seen Hikaru get worked up when they were playing each other, but never like this.

"Okay," he said slowly, deciding on what was needed most. "You want to play or me help you with Japanese? You have homework to

do?"

"Do I!" Hikaru vented with not quite so large an explosion. Then he calmed slightly and frowned at Akira. "Whadda you mean you'll help? Seriously? What happened to only caring about Go?"

"I do not care only about Go," Akira said, though he felt a little stung by the accusation. So he'd pressed a bit hard when he found out the first other child almost his equal he'd played didn't even know about the pro world; that had been a knee-jerk reaction. He couldn't believe his potential rival could be only a casual competitor. "I do my homework."

"Oh I bet you get perfect grades," Hikaru muttered, sounding resentful. Akira tried not to feel hurt. He was used to being shut out from "normal" kids, of which Hikaru definitely was one, even if he wasn't Japanese.

"Fine," Hikaru said suddenly, leaning over and heaving a stack of books and papers out of his backpack. "You *really* wanna help, I'll take it. This is everything from this week--I can't understand *any* of it."

Akira swallowed, looking at it, but took a deep breath and nodded. He wasn't going to back out of a promise, and Hikaru definitely needed it. "Okay. What subject will we do first?"

"I don't care. I'm totally illiterate and barely capable of speech, so they're all the same to me," Hikaru growled. "Can't even do *math* since I can't even read the stupid directions!"

"Then we do math first," Akira said patiently, sorting through his schoolbooks--none in English; ouch--for the correct one. "Directions are not hard. Just need practice. Look at numbers for clue..."

"I hate you," Hikaru repeated ungratefully--but he focused on what Akira was trying to teach him with the intensity of a drowning man,

and tried everything Akira set him with the single-mindedness of clutching a lifeline.

A lifeline which didn't appear to do him much good despite his effort. Akira privately regretted having made such a big deal about Go again the last time they'd met; apparently the poor boy had much bigger more immediate problems than deciding whether to go pro or not. He resolved to stop pushing Hikaru for a little while, just until he had something under his feet to support him. His own wants would have to wait.

In which Hikaru's ghost attempts to help

A/N: For those of you who've enjoyed the scenes with Hikaru's American friends, here's one more appearance... and sorry. They just couldn't stay funny forever. :(That said, bet you wanna read on now, huh?

Stepping Stones

~ **11** ~ In which Hikaru's ghost attempts to give him help ~

Ru? You here? Jamal posted. Wow, what, twice in one month? You realize how long you've been barely even showing up? Hang on, I'm gonna call the others and tell them to get online--geez, you better have a good reason for dumping us like this. We said sorry last time, didn't we?

Hikaru stared at the screen for a moment, taking in the message, and then reached out his hands and started typing with unconscious focus, *Do me a favor, Jay, and make another call for me first.*

A brief pause, and a new line appeared:

What? What's up?

You remember my aunt Kate from all those visits she'd make over the holidays--see if she'd take me in for a few years if I moved back to the U.S.?

**What?* Ru, you're coming home? Seriously?*

*Maybe, he typed, grimly, knowing it was almost certainly futile and hating that. I *want* to. It's been months and I'm still not Japanese, and I'm sick of trying just because Dad pushes so hard.*

Oh, Jamal posted, and Hikaru could almost hear the disappointed resignation even though it had been so long since he'd last actually heard his friend. *What'd he do now?*

Put me in a Japanese school.

*What-- And then on a new line, he's *nuts*! Can you even talk it at all yet?*

Like two words. Sometimes. Despite how long I'm spending trying to cram it all in now every day. I'm going out of my mind.

Dude, I am so sorry for you. You could stay at my place if you can get back, Jamal posted. It'd be great, I've got a new first-person shooter that totally rocks, and T's trying to start a dog-walking business he's already dying at, and Ami's been wearing lipstick to school and keeps getting it smeared all over her food when she tries to eat, it's hilarious. It'd be so great to have you back in the middle of everything!

Hikaru sat back and stared at the screen, feeling irrationally dumbfounded, and just a little hurt and lost. Since when had Jamal been allowed to get any sniper games--since when had Ami ever had the slightest interest in makeup? Since when had Jamal referred to her as Ami instead of Ames?

Ru? Jamal posted. *You still there?*

Since when had he gotten quietly left behind by the last place he had any faint feeling of belonging to?

Hikaru?

Hikaru stared a moment longer, then blindly closed the window and disconnected from the Internet. He didn't want to, couldn't, deal with this at the moment on top of everything else. He wouldn't. It was too much to take in.

Hikaru's second week of school was even worse than his first. He only made it through the tortuous, endless hours surrounded with incomprehensible unfamiliarity by shutting everything out as completely as possible, from the teachers' lectures to the other students' constant undertoned giggling and staring at the lone odd American out. There was no place in the school Hikaru felt even remotely comfortable or like he could fit in, and he was stuck being there for what felt like eternity even though he couldn't understand or learn a thing, and even when he was finally free each day he could never forget that he would have to go back the next morning.

He would have liked to refuse to learn Japanese in retaliation, to maintain at least some control over his own life, but he *needed* to learn it now since that was the only thing that could make his new situation any better. And he found, when he actually really tried to start learning for the first time, that he had no idea how to do it.

Hikaru was, like his mother and father believed, brilliant in his ability to pick up some things when he devoted his attention to them, but the things he learned best were those that used logical deduction--Go was naturally strategic, and math, even algebra, was a natural process flowing from a few operational rules.

Languages were different. He couldn't visualize any base to start from, like the Go board or an already-set-up equation, so the only way he knew to try was to just try to memorize everything all at once. At school he buried himself in Japanese second language books that didn't help him learn or shut out everything around him, and after school he buried himself in them again doggedly without expectation or success.

It did occur to him to apply to his friends for help after his last Go session was aborted in favor of tutoring, but he didn't bother doing so. The tutoring had proved that Hikaru didn't find it any easier trying to learn Japanese from those who had been born into it and grown up using it all their lives, and Akira was the one with the best grip on English. He stopped seeing them nearly as much anyway, even online--Hikaru focused single-mindedly on Japanese, since nothing

less had a chance, and that immediately excluded Go. He didn't have enough concentration or energy to split them between two such intensive subjects, so Go had to be temporarily shoved into the background, no matter how much he resented the necessity.

As far as Waya, Isumi and Akira knew Hikaru stopped playing entirely, and except for one technical exception, they were right. Hikaru stopped playing cold himself when he transferred, but one afternoon he still grimly hauled his laptop out to the shed and connected to NetGo to let Fuji play again. One of the ubiquitous second language books was stuffed into his pocket and he pulled it out and stared at each page while clicking, not even following the game.

He hadn't thought of the ghost for the ghost's sake, or because he had promised to let it keep playing. He remembered those things, but he kept the promise mostly just for the sake of doing one tiny thing *not* related to Japanese, one momentary secret rebellion, even if he wasn't doing it himself. Maybe Jaro's record had become pointless, but it *would* be there anyway. It assumed an importance far beyond its actual one when Hikaru was forced to shove all his other interests aside indefinitely.

The ghost was first thrilled when presented with the magic Go box again, but after Hikaru set it up and turned to his book he vaguely noticed that the ghost's directions for placing were coming in between longer and longer pauses. He finally looked up irritably when he could no longer concentrate for waiting, to find Fuji staring at him with a puzzled and distinctly concerned look.

"What?" Hikaru rasped, and then clamped his mouth shut. Every day going to school wore his endurance down further and turned into a burning behind his eyes, and made it harder to control his voice, but he was not going to cry over such a stupid worthless excuse of a language. He wasn't a kid.

The ghost kept looking at him, then reached out its fan and tapped at the book Hikaru was holding. Hikaru flattened the pages open to let

the ghost see since that was easier than telling it to bug off.

Fuji looked at it for a moment, brow furrowing into an expression like surprise, and then looked up at Hikaru again. Hikaru raised the book and buried himself behind it; he moved the mouse almost blindly when the fan flicked at the screen in his peripheral vision. Then he put the book down with a frown, because the fan was pointing off the virtual board entirely at the *Resign* button.

"Are you insane, you're beating the guy!" Hikaru exclaimed with only a glance at the board. The opponent was only another Experienced player; of course the ghost was winning.

The fan didn't move.

"No!" Hikaru said furiously, batting at the unyielding object and of course passing right through it. Vaguely he knew he was overreacting, but he was long beyond caring about things normally. The pressure that had been building in him needed a vent. "Don't *tell* me you're just quitting all of a sudden on some whim! You could beat this guy in your *sleep* ! What kind of ungrateful jerk are you; nobody good enough anymore? Not worth your time? Well not after all the trouble I went to just for your *sorry* behind--"

Tears leaked out of the corners of his eyes despite himself, and he swiped at them, hating the entire world with passion beyond reason. He clamped his eyes shut and tried to block everything out to help control the tears; the ghost silently enfolded him, not physically touching although some unremarked part of his brain sensed the other presence. He cracked one eye open to check and saw, through a blurry film, one flowing white sleeve rising and falling in steady rhythm as the ghost stroked Hikaru's hair, and kept the eye open a slit just for the faint comfort of the knowledge of that intangible soothing.

So what if he cried a little. It was just a ghost to see anyway.

Hikaru didn't bawl, didn't sob, but he did keep crying for quite a while, slow and feeling awful and refusing to care anymore, until he finally seemed to have cried all his tears out and instead of feeling anything just felt sort of drained and tired. It was a better feeling than the growing buried frustration that had been roiling in his stomach for what seemed like forever.

When he glanced at the computer screen again, he saw that Jaro had resigned by default from being inactive too long, but he didn't feel anything about it, and the ghost didn't seem bothered either. Instead it bent to look at the book he'd brought, a straight English-to-Japanese dictionary, and nudged at it with an expression to Hikaru that requested he help it look inside.

Hikaru picked it up and opened it to a random page for the ghost to read, which it did intently for a moment; then it looked up at Hikaru again and spoke a very slow and short question, pointing at the Japanese character column. Hikaru still couldn't identify any of its words, but guessed its meaning easily enough.

"Yeah," he muttered, feeling the sullen resentment start to grow again. "Gotta get it. My oto-san put me in a Japanese school."

The ghost sat down, precisely like it always did, beside him, then flicked its fan open and covered the page with it. Hikaru blinked at it, startled.

"Hikaru," it said, looking at him instead of pointing since its fan was already occupied.

"Yeah...?" he said, slightly wary.

The ghost removed the fan briefly to gesture at him while saying, "*Hikaru*," again.

"Hikaru," Hikaru repeated.

"Hikaru desu," the ghost said in a correcting tone.

"Oh, right, *I am*," Hikaru muttered to himself. "Hikaru I am; I am Hikaru. Hikaru desu."

The ghost looked pleased. It flipped its fan around and pointed at itself, then back to him; Hikaru didn't even glance at the book. "*Sai-san desu.*"

"Sai-san desu... um... I am Sai-san," Hikaru said slowly, then frowned. Even Japanese people didn't use the honorifics referring to themselves. But they did use the same words to mean different things... " *You are Sai? Sai-san desu?*"

The ghost beamed and pointed its fan at him.

"Hikaru desu," Hikaru said again.

The fan turned to itself again.

"Sai-san desu."

Then he paused, puzzled. "But your name is Fuji. Fuji-san desu."

The ghost smacked its head with the fan, looking exasperated. "*Sai desu,*" it insisted.

"Fine, fine, Sai--Sai-san desu. You know you're still Jaro online though, too late to change that." If the ghost was going to go around making up new names for itself now, at least it still had the one Hikaru had first thought of in one place. He still liked Jaro better than Fuji anyway.

The ghost still looked annoyed, then suddenly straightened a little and pointed its fan at him again. "*Sai-san desu ka.*"

Ka. Ka meant... question. "Oh--are you Sai-san? Sai-san desu ka? Or Fuji-san desu ka?"

"Sai desu," the ghost grumbled, closing its fan.

"Okay, fine, as long as you don't go changing your mind again. Hai. Sai-san desu."

The ghost looked pleased. "*li*."

"What--isn't that *no* ? Gah-- *iee* ?" he tried, unable to remember the exact pronunciation.

"lie," the ghost said, and made a stern and disapproving frown. "*li*." It smiled widely and bobbed its head back and forth, nodding overenthusiastically.

"lie. No," Hikaru repeated. "*li*. Um... another yes? Good?" He grabbed the phrasebook and started hunting through it to check. Its first half was English to Japanese, organized alphabetically; the second was Japanese to English, also alphabetically, using English letters alongside Japanese characters.

"Good, fine, nice," he read. "Ha. *li*."

The ghost beamed. "*Hikaru-kun desu ka*," it then went back to the beginning.

Question, you... "Hai. Hikaru desu," Hikaru confirmed.

"*li*!"

"Fuji-san desu ka," Hikaru then tested.

The ghost glared at him. "*lie! Sai desu!*"

Hikaru laughed. He surprised himself by doing so; the only time he'd come close to laughing since his transfer was a brief temptation to collapse in hysterics when he found out his new schedule included an English class. That would not have been a happy laugh.

"Sai-san desu," he agreed tolerantly, refraining from rolling his eyes.

The ghost gestured at the phrasebook, and Hikaru obediently held it up and turned pages as the ghost indicated. Sure, mastering four words for fifteen minutes wasn't going to make the slightest difference in his overall incompetence, but at least for those fifteen minutes he finally felt like he was achieving something.

Four words a day and he might be capable of basic communication by the time he was fifty... how would Fuji--Sai--react if he worked out the phrase 'I want to burn my school to the ground'? Just be proud of his willingness to find the words and order he needed without help?

The ghost made a pleased sound as it presumably found whatever character it was looking for and turned its attention to him, ready to start again presumably with something new. Hikaru shelved the thought to look for later in his room. Maybe he could make it his mantra if it was easy enough to pronounce.

In which Hikaru's friends make a choice

Stepping Stones

~ **12** ~ In which Hikaru's friends face a difficult decision ~

By the time the next Sunday was half over Hikaru had come to the conclusion that he *could not* bear the prospect of going to school again the following morning. He'd spend the day in the park or wandering the city instead if he had to. But that could get him in trouble, especially if his father found out, so he spent some time marshalling his arguments, logic, and a rather thin veneer of calm before finding his mother and making sure his father was nowhere nearby.

"Mom," he began soberly, shifting from one foot to the other despite his attempt to remain mature and reasonable. His mother had to listen to him. He didn't have anyone else to go to, despite her betrayal in letting him switch schools without a fight.

She looked up from the book she was reading and immediately set it aside, which made him feel a very little bit better inside. He hated being on the out with her; it was the first time that had ever happened.

"Yes, Ru?"

Rather than standing there fidgeting, he moved into the room and sat down beside her abruptly. "I don't want to go back to school tomorrow."

No, that was *not* how he was supposed to start--he had to sound mature! Logical! Where had that stupid speech gone now that he was supposed to actually be saying it?

"I know, honey," his mother sighed, putting an arm around him, which he tolerated since she was his mother. Even though it made

him lean in to her shoulder a little. "Hasn't it gotten even a little better?"

Now was the time to lay out his arguments, or she'd just say 'sorry you can do it' again and not understand. "It makes no difference whether I'm there or not," he said flatly after a quick deep breath to ensure his voice was steady. "If I didn't go, I wouldn't learn anything--and if I did go, I wouldn't understand anything. And I wouldn't be able to concentrate anyway because everyone stares at me and talks about me and I can't understand what they're saying."

His voice wobbled a little at the end despite himself, and he cursed it mentally. Shouldn't have added the last bit at all; it just sounded like kiddy whining. But she *had* to understand--he couldn't *take* this!

"That was one of the things I tried to point out to your father, that your grades would drop for quite a while if he did that," his mother said thoughtfully over his head, which was resting on her shoulder. "But you know how he is when he fixes on a decision first; all criticism is opposition to be overcome."

He knew that all right. Hikaru had always thought vaguely that his father and mother had probably gotten married because she was the only one who could manage him despite that obstinacy; he didn't want to hear that even she couldn't do it all the time. He felt like one more little sliver of his innocent childhood had just been stripped away, never to be preserved.

"I've been thinking it over, and I've come up with an alternative that I think would be better than going back, or even the American school," he resumed after another moment and deep steadying breath. "We could hire a tutor for me."

It was the ghost that had given him the idea, with the actual small success he had enjoyed with it, but he couldn't try to tell his parents he'd found himself a tutor in his backyard shed, and it was still only minimal success he'd had with it since they still couldn't really talk to each other.

His mother's response came in a mild, interested hum.

"I can't think of any way I could learn better," Hikaru pressed, trying to increase his advantage. "I need one-on-one instruction for anything to stick, but that's still not worth much unless the other person can understand English just as well as I do. I need to be able to ask questions and know they understand and that their answer is saying exactly what they mean to. And I could actually keep learning school subjects at the same time, with an English speaker--I could learn everything all together." He held his breath a little as he made his final plea. "Please, Mom. I'm willing to apply myself this time, I really am--" I'm already *killing* myself, he almost added, but didn't, "--I just need help, and I'm asking for it. Please let me try."

His mother was silent for a moment longer this time, which was agonizing because Hikaru knew she was genuinely considering it but couldn't be sure which way she would decide.

"Do you know, Hikaru," she finally remarked, squeezing his shoulder while he suffered, "that this is the first time you've offered any suggestion on your schooling at all since we moved?"

"Is it?" he said vaguely, wishing she would just tell him if he was consigned back to waking nightmare junior high or not. But it might sound desperate to beg.

"Mm. It's the first time I've seen you give any thought to it, actually. And it sounds reasonable."

Hikaru dared to let out a very tiny breath of relief.

"If your father were to agree to trying a tutor, how would we go about it then?"

Hikaru had assumed his parents would take care of that again, just sort of do whatever they did and present him with one when they finished who would hopefully be able to teach him effectively, but he

rapidly revised that assumption in light of his mother's comment on taking responsibility of his own. This was probably a test.

"Uh, go back to the American school and see if any of the oldest students are interested in that kind of thing," he offered, improvising aloud as ideas came together in his head. "Like maybe working on teaching degrees or with little brothers or sisters they help out with or--" the ideas were unfortunately running out quickly, leaving him grasping at straws, "--or even just somebody who used to babysit and could use some extra money or something..."

His mother laughed. "That's not a bad idea, sweetheart; that does seem like the logical place to start looking for someone fluently bilingual."

Hikaru held his breath for a second. She ruffled his hair.

"All right, I'll speak to your father about it. No promises."

His breath let out in a whoosh. "Of course!" he agreed fervently, trying not to look and sound as thrilled as if it were a done deal even though he felt like it.

"It may take a bit to work him around. In the meantime, I expect you to be studying on your own to the extent of your ability."

"I swear!" he promised even more fervently, and added daringly, "And school tomorrow--?"

Because he still wasn't going. But he didn't want to have to mess up his chances of salvation by getting caught skipping and getting in trouble.

His mother looked at him with a vague frown long enough to make him wriggle inside with anxiety. Then she sighed, gave him a knowing half-smile, and said only, "I'll ask no questions and you tell no lies."

Hikaru threw his arms around her in a spontaneous hug, too exuberant with relief to contain himself despite the fact that he didn't *hug* . "I love you Mom!" *This* was how their relationship was supposed to be--so similar there was no question they were close family members. Practically twins from different generations sometimes.

"No promises," she repeated tolerantly, smiling back. But they both knew better by then. When she really wanted something, Hikaru's mother got it, not by persuading but by making her opinion the other person's opinion and then agreeing with them. She called it a southern belle trait. Hikaru still held out small hopes of someday inheriting it or being able to learn it anyway, but as long as she was on his side, it didn't really matter.

When Akira heard the door to the Go salon open and a young man's voice immediately following it, he felt a single thrill of hope that Hikaru had shown up again before logic reasserted itself and pointed out that it was definitely not Hikaru's voice, or language. He looked up to find out whose it was and blinked in surprise to see Hikaru's insei friends, Waya and Isumi, standing at the front counter with differing degrees of evident discomfort. Waya spotted Akira and elbowed Isumi, who left off speaking to the receptionist and followed his shorter friend as he started forging a path toward Akira.

Akira wondered what on earth they were doing here. It had to be about Hikaru. Had he gone to them instead after Akira's less than successful attempt at tutoring and they, rather than Hikaru, had decided to belatedly let him know for some reason? Had Hikaru actually gotten sick and Waya now intended to make good his threat to punish Akira, with his friend's help?

Ridiculous. Surely. Why did the other boy always have to seem so... large? Loud? And unfriendly only around Akira? Akira was used to feeling shut out from other people his age, but why did this boy have to constantly remind him of that with his mere presence?

"Touya," Waya said shortly as he reached Akira's table.

Akira nodded politely, letting none of his slight apprehension or wondering show. "Waya-san."

"Touya-san," Isumi murmured behind the shorter one.

"Have you seen Shindo?" Waya demanded, disregarding all niceties.

Akira blinked again, trying to not annoy the other boy but also to avoid being rude. "Not since before last week." He hesitated a bare second, calculating in his head to decide whether or not to speak again as he did with Go hands, and added, "I have no way to contact him if he doesn't come here." He almost shrugged his shoulders a little to further indicate his helplessness, but didn't feel comfortable enough to do so. Akira only moved easily when he forgot himself, like when he was involved in Go.

"We've tried calling, but the only times he's answered he's said he's too busy and hung up without letting us say anything," Isumi offered with a slight grimace. "He hasn't shown up online..."

"What's going *on* with him?" Waya growled, with such irritation that Akira might have felt nervous if it had been directed at him rather than demanded in general of the air.

Akira calculated likeliest causes and effects, and came to the conclusion that Hikaru's friends had come to his father's salon to ask him about Hikaru's situation since they didn't know and thought he was next closest to the ex-American (which gave him a very small private warm feeling somewhere in his stomach, even if he doubted that were true).

"I suppose he's too preoccupied with transferring schools and studying the language right now to have time to play," he offered, voicing the opinion he had formed and kept repeating to himself when Hikaru seemed to drop all contact after leaving the salon last time.

Waya started, and Isumi blinked.

"Transferring schools? What do you mean transferring schools? He hasn't moved, has he?" Waya demanded.

"He told me his father transferred him to a Japanese school," Akira murmured, refusing to let himself shrink back from the larger boy's focus but explaining as quickly as he decorously could. "He was very upset because he couldn't understand anything and had so much to learn so fast. We didn't even wind up playing one game while he was here."

Waya looked slightly explosive, Akira thought, though thankfully again not directly at Akira, and he relaxed the tiniest fraction while thinking he was glad he wasn't Hikaru's father or possibly even Hikaru right now. Really, it was terribly thoughtless not to have let any of his friends know what was going on, but Akira couldn't feel *too* upset at him when he remembered the miserable stress Hikaru had been struggling under the last time he had seen him.

"Well... no wonder he doesn't have time for Go anymore, then," Isumi finally said softly, reluctantly. "He must be very busy..."

"Busy? How dare that little twerp quit right now just for something as stupid as Japanese lessons?" Waya huffed, looking like he was taking it as a personal affront. "He could make time around it if he wanted! The pro exam is coming up, we were going to get him past the prelims--"

"Waya," Isumi said with a very fixed, speaking look at the shorter boy that shut him up momentarily. "How much Japanese has Shindo learned in all this time we've spent with him? Even just picked up from hearing it in everyday speech and repeated?"

He used one word in front of me once, Akira thought. And one random string he might not even have known the meanings of.

"Basically none," Waya admitted, glowering.

"Imagine if your family moved to an English country and put you in a school where no one else spoke Japanese. How easily would you handle it?"

"He ought to keep his priorities straight though!" Waya protested. "The prelims are starting next week; if he'd keep practicing--we should go over to his house and drag him out and tie him down in front of a Go board!"

"It's his choice," Akira surprised himself by breaking in, albeit quietly. "Hikaru--san--was very upset about what was happening; I think..." it wasn't likely prudent to continue, but he had already started and he felt like he had to defend Hikaru when Hikaru wasn't there to defend himself, as much as it hurt even himself to say, "... I think he needs support from his friends, not pressure of any other kind." Even if it was just urging not to break off from the Go world.

Waya and Isumi both looked at him.

"Easy to say when we couldn't even give him support if we tried, the way he's cutting himself off from us," Waya growled.

"Maybe we should just let him take a break if that's what he wants," Isumi murmured, looking oddly pained at his own words.

"But the prelims--" Waya started to complain.

"Yes, the pro exam," Isumi cut him off, with unexpected intensity. "The pro exam is coming up. And we wanted Shindo to be taking it with us, but he's clearly not. That doesn't mean it's not still coming up."

Waya opened his mouth and then closed it again, without a sound. Akira felt a bit like an intruder in his own father's salon, being there, even though he understood their dilemma.

Waya and Isumi were insei--on a track specifically training to become Go professionals, for which passing the months-long pro

exam was the final test, and there was an age limit on insei that must be pressing down especially hard on Isumi right now as he approached it, even though he could still take the exam as an outsider like Akira would and they had apparently intended to have Hikaru do. The exam was only held once a year; every chance needed to be taken in it. Trying to help Hikaru meant devoting too much attention to something other than Go to stand any chance of earning the required place in the top three to pass.

It seemed awful, but it was their futures they were weighing against one friend's momentary need. As insei, if they didn't make it to Go pros, they probably didn't have any other option left open for their futures--probably neither were still attending school. Akira was still in school, and did well in his classes, but he had been learning Go from his father since he was two and couldn't even fathom how anyone could ever do anything else for the rest of their lives. Just like with the insei, Go was all-consuming to him.

Besides, it was hardly as if Hikaru were hospitalized and possibly taking his last breath while they were off playing endless rounds of games. There was no reason they couldn't continue being friends with him after they all got past their current priorities... although Akira's own friendship (if he called it that) with Hikaru was based solely on Go, and he suspected it might be the same with Waya and Isumi considering they were insei... and passing the pro exam, especially with Hikaru falling out of practice, would essentially mean leaving him behind Go-wise unless and until he caught back up to them. If he could.

Waya shifted uncomfortably and said nothing. Isumi stared over their heads at the wall opposite, looking troubled. Akira sat quietly in his chair and stared at his hands, turning all these thoughts and reasons and conclusions around in his head, finding no flaws, yet understanding the others' apparent guilt. They really had no choice; he doubted even Hikaru would blame them for temporarily letting him struggle on his own. And he himself, of course... he had been planning on taking it this year too...

But that didn't mean, logic pointed out, that his choice was bounded by theirs. He was only thirteen, like Hikaru, even though he, his father, and his father's pro friends were all confident he could pass the exam already... not choosing to take it only meant postponing his own career... for nothing, really, considering Hikaru seemed to have forgotten him; just for the possibility of not being further above Hikaru if he got back into Go and decided to try to go pro...

When he had already told Hikaru that he *wouldn't* wait for him--when he had already challenged Hikaru to come after him into the pros--when Hikaru had evidently chosen not to at least temporarily in favor of focusing on Japanese...

But he would come back to Go eventually, right? Once he had fairly grasped the new language, and could communicate with people other than Akira, Waya and Isumi, and do whatever else he wanted besides playing Go all day... wouldn't he still want to? Despite how much he seemed the opposite type? He couldn't *not*, could he--the only potential rival his own age Akira had ever met...?

And that was all Akira had on which to base his own decision of whether to postpone his own career for another year (or more?) or not.

A/N: Yes, I know, you all hate me now. It's not really a cliffhanger, though, because it's going to be a longer wait than just until next chapter to find out what Akira decides... wait, that doesn't make it any better, does it? :D Please don't kill me--it's not as much fun writing these more serious chapters, but they have to happen before Hikaru can move on to all the plot twists and new characters I'm planning for him. So please bear with me for a while. :)

This is really just me being lazy, but does anyone happen to know when exactly the pro exam takes place in the series? Was it like through May-April? (How sad is it that I don't even have any idea of what time of year it is in my own story... :P)

In which Hikaru turns down a new path

A/N: Okay, I've never actually studied any foreign languages myself, so I'd just like to go ahead and say that I have no real idea if this method would actually be a good one. It makes sense to me, but I don't have any personal experience.

I apologize in advance that there's so little Go in this chapter, but this is the only one like that, and if you think about it there's something fairly significant with the Go scene that is in here. Also, schoolwork is really starting to weigh me down (last month of the semester, and I took a condensed English course with papers due **every* *week** :P), so I might have to start slowing down how often I post chapters for a while. I'll get the next one up next Thursday like usual since I feel bad about the lack of Go, but after that I might go to every other week or something. Pray for summer! :)

Stepping Stones

~ **13** ~ In which Hikaru's life diverts down a new path ~

Hikaru was a bundle of nerves the morning his tutor was supposed to arrive for the first time, unable to sit still or concentrate on anything for more than a few seconds. It *had* to go well with this tutor; it was his last chance to avoid drowning in Japanese school. If he turned out to be wrong thinking it would be easiest to learn one-on-one with an English native... but he was *not* thinking about what could go wrong. He wasn't thinking about it at all; he was concentrating on Missile Command... and how fast he could lose, apparently...

When the doorbell rang, he was out of his seat and bursting down the hall before his mother had even finished opening the door and greeting the visitor, momentarily robbing himself of breath and speech in the process. "Ohayo. Sensei. Desu--Hikaru desu," he

scrambled, knowing that was not making a very good impression even though he had rehearsed it about a million times in his head.

"Ohayo, Hikaru-kun. Dani desu," the stranger answered with a cheerful smile. She was tall, with a dishwater-blonde ponytail and no accent (or, rather, a vaguely Northern American accent), which reassured Hikaru that she was as non-Japanese as he was, and looked to be about twenty. "Or Danielle if you prefer the English version, given that Japanese doesn't use I's. Let's not bother with the sensei stuff, unless you'd prefer it?"

"I'd probably never remember to use it anyway," Hikaru admitted, relaxing further.

She grinned at him. "Good. I've tutored a couple other kids before, and the ones who liked it seemed a bit too much Americans-into-Japanese-'culture,' you know?"

"Geeks?" Hikaru suggested, having occasionally teasingly been called one himself.

"Fanboys, more I'd say." Then she glanced at Hikaru's mother, with a nod-of-her-head greeting as opposed to a partial bow, and added with a smile, "Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Shindo. I'm Danielle Friedman, the tutor you hired for Hikaru?"

"Nice to meet you in person," Hikaru's mother agreed, with an amused smile of her own. "Would you like anything to drink; any refreshments?"

"Thanks, but I'm fine. You want to go ahead and get started?" she asked Hikaru, who only nodded, nerves increasing again at the prospect. "Well, it's usually easiest to study in your room, unless you've got some other place?"

He shook his head.

"Then why don't you show me there. And don't worry, I'm not planning to throw you headfirst into the books as soon as we get there," she added with a knowing grin.

"What? Why not?" Hikaru asked as he led her down the hall, surprised back into speech. "What else is there?"

"Well--first, I don't always make very immediate points. Can you work with that?"

"Sure," he said vaguely.

"Good. Well, I've had quite a few teachers through all the schools I've attended, back home and here, and the difference I noticed as I got older between which ones were 'good' and which ones weren't was how well I understood them. Not how well they taught, how well I understood how they were teaching. It's kind of an individual thing, the matchup between student and teacher, you see?"

Hikaru nodded, slowly, not actually sure but following. He sat down in his computer chair when they reached his room and she sat without invitation on his bed since there really weren't any other places to sit.

"So when I tutor kids, I try to teach them so that *they* understand it. And it's easier to do that if I have an idea of how they learn easiest, what analogies they relate to, stuff like that. Which means your first lesson is probably going to be just as much talking as it will be reading or studying anything." She grinned at him. Hikaru grinned back, feeling like he was being handed a reprieve--temporary, but still, who was he to argue with the teacher?

"So, what kind of stuff do you like to do when you're not beating your head over the cultural warp?"

"Surfing the web. Soccer, kinda. Used to be movies," Hikaru automatically listed, his mind bringing up his old interests before the Big Move. "Playing Go."

"That's a game? What kind?"

Hikaru blinked. It had been so long since he'd interacted with anyone who didn't spend half their time on Go that he'd forgotten most people weren't even aware of it. "Uh, strategy, I guess. Kinda like... checkers, connect four, tic-tac-toe. Except more like on a chess level."

"One player or two?"

"Two." Geez, he really was explaining badly. "Basically you play on this big grid, nineteen by nineteen lines, putting down black and white stones, and try to get more territory than your opponent. No other rules on how to move or anything."

She nodded a little, looking considering. "Huh. Sounds interesting. Ever do any reading besides for schoolwork?"

He hesitated, thinking of his favorite manga and her comment of 'fanboys.' "Er, comics."

He'd picked up some X-Men occasionally, a few Green Lantern (or was it Green Arrow?) and Fantastic Four and all that; they were comics. They had a collection so big he couldn't even count them all back in America. There were just so many alternate timelines and different styles and crossovers into different universes that they'd never seemed worth the bother of trying to really get into.

"Ever tried Japanese comics now that you're here, manga?" she asked. "I think there are plenty of English translations online."

Hikaru noticed absently that she said the Japanese word with Japanese pronunciation, mahn-ga instead of mane-ga like he'd always thought before moving. "Yeah, there are," he agreed without thinking, then stopped and looked at her with surprise and suspicion. "You'd know?"

She grinned at him. "Who, me, after arbitrarily labelling other people geeks? How could I be so hypocritical?"

"I bet you read shoujo," Hikaru muttered, watching her reaction, mostly as a test. He didn't actually often talk back, however little, to a teacher to their face.

"And I bet you read typical macho badly-drawn shounen. There, now we're both outed, and I take back my judgmental comment. I just can't think of tutors and martial arts dojo heads on the same level, deserving the same title, you know? Probably because of my own fangirl manga experience when I was younger. What series are your favorites?"

"The popular ones, I guess." Even though he didn't read anything just because it was popular. Apparently what he liked, a lot of other people liked too. "Black Cat, One Piece, Dragonball--well, mostly just watch that one..." He gave her a sideways glance. "The manga I like are seriously important to you teaching me how to speak Japanese?"

"You might be surprised," she said comfortably, crossing her legs on his bed. "The easiest way to learn anything as big as a new language is to take it as easy as possible, look at it in an everyday setting, and then use it as much as possible in an everyday setting. The language they teach in school is never the language they speak on the street, you know that, right?"

Hikaru thought back to his old Spanish classes. Of all the phrases he remembered, he couldn't imagine ever using a single one if talking to a Spanish-speaking person. "The sky is blue," "the book from the library"...

"Yeah, guess so."

"Tell me, how have you been trying to learn it so far?"

Hikaru shifted a little in his seat. "I got this decent translation dictionary, so I've basically just been reading through it over and over."

"Ah. Okay, first rule under my reign, and it's absolute--no memorizing. Not unless I specifically tell you. We can experiment some, of course, but that's the *worst* way for me and I have the feeling it might be for you too if it hasn't been working that well before now."

Hikaru just nodded.

"Here's what I want you to try instead: keep the book with you all the time--can it fit in a pocket? That would be best--and whenever you want to use a Japanese word, look it up. If you want to say a sentence, look up each and every word, and do that each and every time. Eventually--might take a little while, might surprise you how fast--the words you look up most will start coming to mind before you've even flipped the pages. And without you tearing your hair out trying to memorize them."

Hikaru nodded again, slowly. It sounded tedious, extremely so, but he was willing to try anything if it had a chance of working better. It wasn't like he had a reputation with anyone to lose going around with his nose in a book all the time anyway.

"Good. Then that takes care of the general studying. I'll give you some specifics, too, like homework assignments. You know you're welcome to suggest your own ideas with anything or tell me if you don't like mine; I generally operate on a seat-of-the-pants basis for this kind of stuff until we both figure out what works best."

"Okay. Everything sounds good so far," Hikaru assured her.

"Glad you think so. And now back to those hobbies of yours and how they're related to the homework I'll make up for you. What I think you should try first is just getting used to Japanese-American things in

your everyday life--not just one, not just the other. I assume you go on YouTube sometimes?"

"Course."

"Then look up some of the Dragonball episodes you've already seen that aren't dubbed, best would be the ones that have English subtitles and romaji--Japanese using English letters--if there are any, and try to pay attention to the sounds the characters are making connected to the English letters and Japanese syllables. Don't study it, just let it soak in. One of the hardest things is learning to distinguish words in all that stream of babble and jabber, yeah?"

Hikaru nodded slowly, wondering if he could possibly convince his father that his new tutor really had told him to watch anime as homework. It didn't seem likely.

"Then get your translation dictionary back out and see how much of an episode you can transcribe by hearing without using the subtitles. Go through it however many times you need, one sound at a time if you need. Play around with the lines if you want once you've got 'em, figure out how to make the characters say different things, and write your new stuff down in English and romaji. Don't worry about spelling, just write it however it sounds. I'll check your accuracy, we'll see how it works for you and if something else would be better, and then we'll go from there. Sound good?"

Hikaru nodded again, surprised into momentary speechlessness. It sounded... possible. It even sounded reasonably convincing if his father poked his nose in and asked testy questions about how much he had learned after twenty minutes under his new tutor's guidance. "I can do that."

"Good." She smiled at him. "Most important thing at the beginning is to relax, Hikaru. It's hardest to learn if you feel like you've *got* to. I'll take responsibility for your progress with your parents as long as you're doing your best with whatever I come up with, okay?"

"Deal," Hikaru said immediately. "I was kinda planning on doing that anyway."

"Ha. Now, I'm also being paid to keep you relatively caught up on the work you're missing by not being in school right now, so from here on I'm going to turn part donkey and do all the reading and writing translation necessary for you to have an idea what's in these books and turn in anything that's remotely comprehensible."

"Okay," Hikaru agreed. Getting a tutor hadn't been a subconscious idea for slacking off work; it had been a last-ditch redirection of his effort into a new channel. If it worked, he'd throw his heart and soul into it until he had the stupid stuff mastered.

"Fair warning, all that work is going to motivate me to shove as much as possible off back onto you. Ready to get started?"

"Okay," Hikaru agreed again, pulling out his schoolbooks, and settled into the utterly focused mindset he used for Go much more easily than he had since before transferring.

"Play," Hikaru told the ghost--Sai--in Japanese, then repeated it to himself in English, and again in Japanese. Maybe he wasn't supposed to memorize, but he wasn't trying anymore, he was just trying to... emphasize. "Okay, you're black." He flipped through the book to look up the word for 'black.'

The ghost looked at him dubiously, but followed his direction and pointed at a cross section on the virtual board. Hikaru pointed and clicked with his nose buried the book, looking up whatever random words occurred to him as practice, muttering to himself over questionable pronunciations.

The ghost played slowly at first, glancing at him and occasionally frowning slightly, but gradually picked up and seemed to get properly involved. While it did, Hikaru started running out of random words occurring to him, and then on a sudden whim grinned (he'd actually

tried whistling--badly--as he hauled his laptop out to the shed that morning and set it up) and laid the book aside to lean closer to the screen. While the ghost queried in a confused tone, he located the Chat box and clicked the cursor in it.

"Practice," he told Sai, still grinning. "You just keep playing."

The rest of the game saw both of them fully involved, Hikaru in looking up words and figuring out what order to put them in, the ghost in choosing hands and laughing at Hikaru's choices of what to type in the Chat box. 'Hi how are you' was boring; he picked riddles instead, drawing from a site he'd found surfing that had a long list of them. The ghost proved useful in finding the (presumably) correct characters for the words he said, too, since he couldn't be sure that the Japanese opponent would understand English letters no matter what they sounded out. Sai didn't seem to know romaji anyway.

In which much time passes in small steps

A/N: I promise, people, this will be the most detailed Hikaru's language lessons get since they don't really advance the plot; next chapter is working back into Go. As you'll see at the end. *evil grin*

One more reminder: I'm going to switch to posting a new chapter every other week for a while now while I get through the end of this semester and try to write a few chapters ahead so I have a buffer again if I decide to go back and change anything (and for when I feel lazy and don't write ;D).

Also, from here on out there's going to be a bigger mix of English and Japanese being spoken, since Hikaru will start understanding a little, so any suggestions on how to keep which language is which as clear and readable as possible would be greatly appreciated. I'm not sure if I want to put Japanese in italics or anything, but I don't want it to get confusing. I think one person's mentioned it's a little confusing already. :P At the least, once I do start posting those chapters, I'd be hugely appreciative if my more educated reviewers would let me know if Hikaru's beginner's grasp is unrealistic or if I make any stupid mistakes on anything due to my lack of knowledge and experience. :) Enjoy!

Stepping Stones

~ **14** ~ In which much time passes in small steps ~

"Now talking won't sound like you're used to since pronunciation is flat, no accents on any syllables like in English."

"Yeah, I know," Hikaru said. He had picked up a very few things about the native tongue in the American school.

His tutor grinned. "Sorry if I'm rehashing the basics; I just don't know what you know until I know. You'll just have to bear with me for a while."

"Sure," Hikaru agreed.

"Okay." Hikaru cleared his throat, held up the already dog-eared and increasingly worn book in front of him as if it were a script, and laboriously announced, "Boku dai-su-ki--uh, -sen--chotto mat-te... kaimono." Proudly, he looked up, only to see the ghost squeezing its lips and eyelids together as if trying to hold in something difficult, probably out of politeness.

"All right, what part was wrong, hotshot?" he demanded, scowling. "'I really don't like a little'--" He checked the book again, having briefly forgotten the meaning of the last word he chose, "--'shopping'! I don't like shopping! What, you got something for shopping? Been wishing you could go out and find a nice new dress to go with that hat or something?"

The ghost just nodded and smiled, definitely not comprehending, looking more than ever like it was swallowing both comments and chuckles.

"Much improved," Danielle decreed, studying his latest example of a Yu Yu Hakusho transcript. "You're pretty fast with this, kiddo. You want more of the same or a new homework assignment?"

"What kinda new?" Hikaru asked.

"How good are you with numbers?"

"Er... in Japanese?"

She raised one eyebrow and put one hand on her hip.

"Sorta okay," he hedged. "They're in my book."

"All righty then. Go over them a few times--not memorizing, just 'oh yeah that's that' familiarity if you can--and then go out and order something to eat from one of the shops around here. You should be able to handle it, it's such a short and preset interaction--you can even use the book-a-word approach if you want to. And you can be adventurous and try something new, too."

Hikaru suppressed the urge to make a face at that suggestion, since there had been a couple weird things he'd tried before when out with Waya and Isumi that had actually tasted okay. "How'll you check that homework?" he asked just out of curiosity.

She grinned. "You tell me what you had, I'll count your change and tell you how badly you got cheated."

"And then take a percentage as a fee for extra services, I bet."

"Hey, us poor college students gotta earn money somehow."

Book in pocket, where it was ready to be pulled out but would hopefully remain safely out of sight, Hikaru stepped up to the counter, marshalled his confidence, and ordered, "Takisoba." As an afterthought, to be polite, he added the Japanese word for 'please,' one of the few he was totally sure of and had actually had memorized for quite a while: "Onegaishimasu."

The woman who was supposed to take his order, rather than doing so, looked at him for a moment before saying something way too fast and likely too complicated for him to understand. Then she just kept looking at him.

"Takisoba?" Hikaru repeated, trying not to sound helpless or whiny.

"Sosu ya kisoba?" the Japanese woman returned.

"Oh." Hikaru deflated slightly. Crap. "Uh, yeah, sure, thanks--hai."

"So, what next?" Hikaru asked, Danielle unusually having not started speaking immediately after checking his ongoing transcribing efforts.

"Couple questions for ya." She drummed her fingers on the laid-aside sheets of smudged notebook paper. "You seriously barely knew any Japanese before your parents hired me even though you were trying to learn it?"

"Yeah," Hikaru said, slightly puzzled.

"Okay then, second question: do you *have* a life beyond working on this day in and day out, kid?"

"Uh... no. Not until I get it down," Hikaru said, more puzzled and slightly concerned. Shouldn't a tutor be *happy* about getting a student who really worked at it?

"Hikaru." She set the papers further aside and left off drumming, instead leaning forward and giving him a very intent look. "I'll be the first to say your progress is incredible, but how long do you think it's going to last if you don't ever take some breaks from it to do something else you enjoy? What about all those other things you like--soccer, that board game? Your mom said you used to *breathe* playing it every day, it seemed like."

Hikaru shifted uncomfortably. "'S'not like I quit Go, I just--I can only really concentrate on one thing at a time," he protested. "I'm just taking a break from it. And I *am* still playing a little anyway." For a ghost, but that wasn't something he needed to mention. "Just gimme something new to study again."

She leaned back, folded her hands behind her head, and said, "How long do you figure it takes to master a second language?"

He thought about it, vaguely--'master' seemed like a potentially subjective term. Fluent, like his father with English? How long did his father always mutter that it had taken him after first moving to America? "I dunno, a couple years?"

"I'd say I only mastered Japanese within the last couple years, Hikaru, and I've been here since I was *thirteen* . You can't put the rest of your life on hold to just *pick up* a second language; you've got to integrate it into your life as is--like I thought I told you. You only need a relatively small working vocabulary to be able to interact with people on a day-to-day basis, and just doing that will increase that vocabulary, and so on. You don't have to be an expert at one thing before you move to another, bud."

Yes, but if you wanted to be an expert you had to, Hikaru thought, annoyed, even though he knew that was a basically pointless argument. He wouldn't have improved his Go even half as fast when he first moved if he hadn't spent most of practically every day in the backyard shed playing against Sai. And his father wouldn't accept anything less than the same level with Japanese, would he?

Danielle just sighed and shook her head. "You are one amazing over-achiever, kiddo. Why not get back in touch with those friends you've mentioned and practice with them instead of in here all the time, then?"

Hikaru blinked, surprised by the reminder of the friends he had actually forgotten about. Maybe that wasn't a bad idea, before he started possibly feeling guilty about having dropped them all without any warning like that...

Gee, he really did get wrapped up in one thing at a time sometimes like she'd said.

"... Aaand... how 'bout a goodbye..." Hikaru checked the ubiquitous book, furrowing his brow over the tiny still-meaningless Japanese

character, and finally pointed to one onscreen that looked similar to him and asked Sai, "Sayonara?"

"Ka," the ghost reminded absently, leaning closer over his shoulder and looking at both page and computer. The fan pointed to a virtual character that to Hikaru's eyes looked identical to the one he had guessed. "*Sayonara.*"

"Right," Hikaru muttered, clicking it and watching it appear at the end of his message. Satisfied, he clicked Post, then logged off and stretched, completely oblivious to the fact that he had just spent nearly an hour laboriously composing a proper, readable Japanese text apologizing for his absence to his friends in America who would understand it even less than he could.

"Hey, you wanna try something new for a little while? Just for fun?" he asked the ghost, a whim striking. "Stay here, I'll be right back."

In a moment he returned with his long-neglected soccer ball, juggling it between hands to remind his body of its familiarity with it. "C'mon, we can play behind the shed to make sure Mom doesn't see," he decreed. "Can you leave? Ever tried? C'mere, over here."

Hikaru made his gestures more than plain even if he had for once left the book in the shed rather than sticking it in his pocket. The ghost looked understanding even though also hesitant, very tentatively taking steps away from the goban. It stopped halfway between the board and door, strained obviously forward, and then its shoulders slumped slightly and it retreated, looking frustrated and defeated.

"Ah geez." Hikaru jogged back inside, frowning in sympathy as he took in the mere few paces the ghost was evidently able to go. "How come you're not stark raving nuts stuck in here all the time? It's not because you can only play Go, right? Hang on."

He pitched the soccer ball outside into the yard behind the shed, rubbed his hands against his pant legs as he approached the goban,

then hauled it up and started carrying it outside, one step at a time, despite the ghost's astonished protests and gesturing. He got the goban all the way outside, ghost following, and plunked it down in the middle of the shed wall on the side opposite the house.

"Can't have Mom thinking I'm going crazy talking to myself," he informed Sai as he got his breath back from the short trip and retrieved the ball. "All right, what we're gonna play is called soccer. You're goalie. I'll just kick the ball toward you, and if I hit the wall without you touching the ball that's a point to me, right? And if you can reach it before it hits that's a point to you. Best of ten wins."

The ghost just stood by the goban, staring around at everything and at him looking bewildered and wondering and totally uncomprehending. Hikaru held up the ball, pointed to it just to be clear, and then kicked it deliberately softly toward the wall.

Sai yelped and jumped aside.

"No, no, you're supposed to try to *block* it, stupid!"

Hikaru ran forward, lecturing, to demonstrate what to do. The ghost pouted and said something back that sounded accusatory and complaining. Thirty minutes later the game had turned into onesided two-person dodgeball, with the ghost as the goal instead of goalkeeper and proving remarkably agile (and childish), and Hikaru was so involved in shouting and laughing that it never even occurred to him his tutor might have been right about taking a break every once in a while.

"Another thing that makes it easier is to find specific goals," Danielle told him. "Bringing in short-term memorization now, but just short-term. You're not trying to learn the whole language *right now*, you're trying to learn the words you'd need to tell your mother about something funny on the Internet today. And she'll understand if some of those words are a little mixed up or still in English. You're trying to get the vocabulary down for joining your friends at karaoke--" she

grinned when Hikaru shuddered dramatically, "--or understanding what they're asking and explaining you're not interested, why don't we go to the arcade instead? See? Small steps. Break it up into units, put those together, and you've learned the whole language without even trying. Not quite that easily, of course, but basically."

Hikaru nodded, preparing himself mentally for the step he had already been working on, and then took a deep breath and without using his book pronounced slowly and carefully in Japanese, "I want to burn my school to the ground."

At his tutor's reaction, he quickly straightened his face again, into as innocent and dutiful an expression as possible, and equally correctly recited, "Hi. I am American and just learning to speak this language."

Danielle applauded.

"Hi Mom. Bye Mom," Hikaru said as he passed through the kitchen from his room, heading out the back door.

"Hi dear. Bye dear," his mother echoed absently.

Hikaru paused and craned his head to see what she reading, struck by the suspicion that it resembled a cookbook. The only cookbooks his mother owned that he knew of were the ones his father had given her back when they first moved to Japan. "Are we making another expedition into the land of exotic rice?"

"Brat." She raised her eyes from the page and smiled at him. "What do you think of trying sushi?"

"Er..." *Bleah*, his mind suggested rather than reminding him what it was. "... Fish, right?"

"Apparently it's rice and fish together, in a roll."

Eeuurgh, his mind volunteered instantly. He made a face.

She grinned. "I could cook the fish if that makes it sound more appealing."

"*Raw*?" Hikaru demanded, horrified. "Rice and raw fish? Couldn't we get salmonella or something? Come on, Mom!"

"You're learning, I'm learning," she murmured, returning her nose to the cookbook with a smile that looked far too amused at his expense.

Hikaru grimaced, then asked, hoping distraction might produce something more like cheeseburgers with fish on them that he could just pick off, "Hey Mom, if I can find a program that converts webpages and text and stuff between Japanese and English, can I get it?"

"Hm? For studying?"

"Yeah." And to make it easier to communicate with Sai. Coincidentally.

"That sounds nice. Let me know what you find."

Hikaru took a deep breath, glanced around at the incomprehensible street signs wishing he needed to check the address, and then entered the building before he could entertain second thoughts and climbed the stairs to the proper floor. The receptionist lady looked up at him and smiled without recognition; Hikaru nodded back, then shook his head and smiled to indicate he wasn't there to play and kept going toward the back of the salon and the lone boy sitting there at a goban with his back to the entrance.

He stopped a few paces away, cleared his throat, and said, "Ah... ohayo, Akira."

In which Hikaru ventures back into Go

A/N: I actually intended to try to get this up a couple days ago since everyone's been so patient, but then I found out I could turn in four response papers I missed in English even though they'd be late... up until today. So yeah. I may have mentioned this before, but never take a condensed English course even if you like writing, you may change your mind by the end... XP

Also, it's hard to type with a kitty in your lap. Yes, totally random. :)

Anyway, here's the next chapter (finally); gimme another couple weeks to get over finals and hopefully I'll be back to my normal post-a-week schedule. In the meantime, enjoy! (And review? *puppy eyes*)

Stepping Stones

~ **15** ~ In which Hikaru ventures back into Go ~

Akira turned around immediately, one hand still suspended over the board holding a black stone, blank surprise evident on his face. "Hikaru. You are here."

"Er, yeah. Hai," Hikaru amended, kicking himself mentally to get back to Japanese. Very carefully and awkwardly despite how many times he had practiced it, he apologized for not having come back sooner. Then, concentration for another language at its limit, he switched mental gears again gratefully and repeated just for good measure, "I really am sorry. I swear I actually totally forgot about everything for a while."

Akira had just kept looking at him the whole time, his expression turned neutral, which unfortunately didn't change. After a moment he nodded shortly and said, "I understand. I accept apology."

Hikaru relaxed, even though he'd tried not to let himself be tense.

"Your Japanese have much improved," Akira continued in a polite tone, still looking at him. "You have not played Go much since?"

Hikaru shook his head, grimacing. "No. lie. Haven't had any time." Still feeling awkward, he glanced at the board in front of Akira, and for a moment saw only a blur of black and white stones, meaninglessly arranged. He found himself surprised to not fall immediately into his analyzing mindset, even though it had been so long since he'd last played. (Clicking for Sai didn't count since he hadn't paid any real attention to those games.)

"I didn't mean to drop it though," he continued hastily, shaking himself away from the board. "I mean just because of it being after the whole pro thing--I mean I wasn't avoiding you on purpose or anything. Or Waya and Isumi, either. Any idea how I can get in touch to apologize to them too? I didn't see them online, and I don't really wanna call--" He shrugged one shoulder, suppressing the urge to grimace again.

"You could ask if Go Association have their addresses," Akira said, looking reserved.

"Ah. Okay." Hikaru wondered whether to ask what or where the Go Association was, then remembered the insei building with Nase and all those kids and assumed he could ask there, so he just nodded. "Arigato. Thanks."

Akira started to speak again, then paused and looked hesitant. "Waya-san and Isumi-san... probably are busy," he finally said carefully, no longer meeting Hikaru's gaze. "Probably studying very hard now."

"Oh-kay." Hikaru frowned. "Any particular reason?"

"The professional exam is now," Akira said quietly.

Hikaru blinked. Then he blinked again. "They're taking an exam to become pros? Now?"

Akira nodded. "Two month exam," he then clarified. "Not today, but now. One month left."

"Oh." Hikaru shifted, then stood still, wondering what to say. It was stupid to think they'd still be at the same place as before just because he'd stopped for a while. "So, in a month, if they pass, they'll be pros?"

"Yes."

"Well... huh." He shifted back to his other foot. "Um, do pros only play other pros, or, like..."

Akira looked nearly as awkward as Hikaru felt. "Some. I will still come to salon even when I am pro."

Hikaru forgot to pay attention to his feet for a moment. Trying to be casual, he asked, "You taking this test right now too?"

Akira stared studiously at the Go stone still in his hand. "No."

"Ah." Hikaru felt an odd loosening sensation, but he didn't pay much attention to it. "That's nice. Good. I mean, I'm sure you could pass, but..." He shook his head, giving up on the attempt to add on belated tact. Then he pointed his finger at Akira and said firmly, "Okay. Then I'll see you around again. I *will* be back."

Akira smiled for a second, posture relaxing slightly. "Then I will expect you. Do not be late again."

Hikaru nodded, satisfied, and headed out. He would have liked to stay for a game, but not against Akira when he was rusty. He'd just wait, brush up, and then, like he promised, he'd be back.

"Hey Mom." Hikaru rooted around in the refrigerator for a snack, taking the opportunity to relax his mind from the math homework Danielle had left him that he was diligently wading through. It instantly flitted to one topic. "When did you decide what you wanted to be when you grew up?"

"Hm?" His mother paused in loading the dishwasher and glanced thoughtfully away out the window. "I don't recall ever wanting to be any one thing in particular very much. I had fantasies, of course, like everyone does: being Scarlett O'Hara in the next *Gone with the Wind*, competing in professional dressage... that's horseback riding. Since my family was well-off and indulgent, they let me try things, and I lost interest in them all eventually."

She looked at Hikaru and smiled. "Then I met your father, and decided I wanted to get married--and I haven't gotten tired of that yet, even if I have lost my patience every once in a while."

Hikaru made an obligatory face at the mention of romance, mind busy going over everything else she had said. "So you never really knew you wanted to be something, like-- *do* something?"

His mother folded the dish towel she had been using, laid it neatly over the edge of the sink, and turned back to him with her obvious full, though mild, attention. "Is there something in particular you're thinking of, dear?"

"I've just been thinking..." He shrugged, partly uncomfortable and partly unhappy. "How do you *know* if you'll want to do something for the rest of your life? How can you know, already, that you won't get tired of it someday? How can you be sure?"

"Oh, honey, you don't *have* to know already." She looked at him compassionately. "Hardly anyone knows what they want to be when they're only thirteen. You have years ahead to think about that."

Hikaru just nodded, his mind not set at ease but not wanting to try discussing it anymore yet.

Hikaru wound up calling Waya and Isumi--meaning Isumi, really-- anyway, as the idea of turning up unannounced at their front doors seemed even more awkward when he considered it, but Isumi didn't pick up. Factoring in what Akira had told him about the pro exam going on and not wanting to risk disturbing Isumi by calling a lot more, Hikaru stalled for a few days, then finally compromised and headed to the insei building to ask for their addresses and see if they happened to be there.

He felt extremely proud of himself for getting through the brief interaction with the receptionist without getting any weird looks or distinct pauses from her for his Japanese--never minding that she seemed the type who would nod and smile if a tattooed biker in leather and chains walked in out of the blue and asked for a large burlap bag and a back door out. He would just take it as proof of Danielle's assertion that he really did only need basic vocabulary to start with.

After learning that only professional players had their personal information registered with the Go Association, not insei, Hikaru couldn't resist the temptation to poke around a little again like he had when he'd discovered the kids--the insei. He wasn't sure exactly why he wanted to, but reasoned that maybe he'd run into that girl Nase and she could tell him where her friends lived. Or if they'd be around anytime soon so he could happen to run into them instead.

His feet either remembered or stumbled across the way to the same large room that proved to still be full of a random collection of studious-looking kids all quietly playing Go. As before, Hikaru lingered and watched, this time wondering what inspired such drive in all those intent faces. Was that really all there was to deciding they wanted to be professional--just playing one game at a time like that, and then always playing one more afterward?

Could it be just because they never reached the end to playing? That was how he'd started, come to think of it; he'd first found a site that played on nine-by-nine boards instead of nineteen-by-nineteen,

learned that, and eventually mastered it. He probably would've dropped off playing Go then, feeling finished, if he hadn't discovered that that was baby Go, and moved on to nineteen-by-nineteen instead. He'd learned it too now, but he still hadn't come close to mastering it--it was just so much bigger it seemed limitless no matter how much he played; different opponents made it infinite.

Maybe that was it. They were out to master it, and the only way to do that was through opponents, so they were aiming up to the best opponents there were to beat them eventually. And there was always someone better, no matter what the field, so they could spend their whole lives on it. Pro Go.

Hikaru's randomly roaming gaze settled on Nase playing some stranger and stopped, recognizing her. He barely kept himself from making a sound or gesture to get her attention, remembering the sensei-master from last time and his disapproval of Hikaru's presence. So instead he forced himself to wait patiently until her game finally ended, then through an interminable post-game discussion he couldn't even follow, then the sensei's further critiques or advice. As soon as she stepped outside the room he pounced on her.

"Hikaru-kun?" she uttered, looking surprised.

"Konnichiwa!" he exclaimed, having to restrain himself after spending such a long time not expending energy. In Japanese he continued, knowing it was clumsy and broken but hopefully still understandable, "Know where Waya or Isumi?"

"Good!" she approved, with a wide smile, while he remembered that she taught kids things. Then she said something too quickly for him to catch.

Reverting to English, he said, "Uh, hang on," and pulled out his translation dictionary, mentally sighing in resignation over the necessity of doing it in public. He flipped through quickly to one of the phrases he'd scribbled and then highlighted, suspecting how

often he would need to use it, and read off in Japanese again, "Could you repeat that, please?"

She did so, looking quizzical, and shifted to look over his shoulder as he started scanning for the unfamiliar sound. After a moment she gestured to the book and asked, deliberately slowly, "May I?"

Hikaru handed it over to her. She flipped through it for a moment, settled in the Japanese-first section, and quickly located and pointed to what he'd been looking for.

"Thanks. Arigato," he said gratefully, glad she wasn't the type to make much of his low comprehension level even if she did teach things. She just smiled, and with the book as a mutual aid related where Waya and Isumi were spending most of their time and that they would probably be happy to see him even with the pro exam going on. She was, in fact, going to be meeting up with them the very next day at Waya's house to do some group studying. Hikaru willingly accepted her invitation to come along.

The boys' reactions when he showed up the next morning relieved all his nerves and apprehension almost immediately. Waya rose and thumped him on the back as he hailed him, of which Hikaru perfectly understood the first word, 'Konnichiwa;' while Isumi, ever more restrained than his friend, looked up and greeted him with a smile that looked absolutely genuine. Then he apologized to Hikaru for their having left him on his own while he was struggling because of the exam.

"No, that's fine, I'm sorry too," Hikaru assured them. Really, he had no reason to be mad, especially considering he'd totally brushed them off, even if it was still sort of weird trying to get used to their going pro now, already. He had Sai, and what could they have done anyway? "Let's just call everybody even?"

It was a lot easier to agree and actually feel like everybody was even with Waya and Isumi (and Nase, though she didn't really count in that) than with Akira, maybe because they seemed more friends than

rivals. Hikaru was able to settle in almost as though there had never been a break, joining Isumi and Nase on the floor around a half-played game on a goban while Waya apparently continued to hone his skill at his computer in an online match. Hikaru noticed quickly, to the accompaniment of Isumi's sighs and Nase's eye-rolling, that Waya made online practice extremely animated. At least he seemed inclined toward constant muttering rather than anything noisier, though.

Isumi and Nase finished their game relatively quickly, with Nase apologizing for not having provided more of a challenge. Hikaru grasped that Isumi was working hardest on getting through the pro exam, maybe because he was oldest, and Nase was really only there to help him out even though she was technically entered too. So Hikaru offered to play Isumi next, figuring he could at least help out a little also.

He was surprised, and not in a pleasant way, at how their game went right from the start. Isumi had always been a good player; Hikaru only won against him about half the time in the few online matches they'd played before, and he had for some reason assumed they would both still be at about that rough level even if Isumi had improved. But Isumi *had* improved, and Hikaru hadn't--he hadn't played in at least a couple of months, and Isumi gave him no chance to ease back in and rub off his rustiness.

As the game continued Hikaru came face to face with the unexpected realization that, even though he hadn't backslid or anything, he simply wasn't good enough anymore even to give Isumi the challenge he'd offered. It was an extremely unwelcome realization. He didn't know what to do about it, so he just kept playing, even though he knew he stood no chance of winning.

Fortunately in the middle of their game Waya suddenly let out a shout, startling both players and spectator into turning around and staring at him.

"Waya!" Isumi said irritably. " *What ?*"

Hikaru felt distractedly proud of his understanding of the single simple question in Japanese.

He didn't understand Waya's answer, of course, as it was delivered far too fast, even faster than the normal rate of speech, but it prompted Nase to roll her eyes and mutter something disgustedly and Isumi to sigh, sounding exasperated. Then he explained to Hikaru, just like he always had before, "Waya study new NetGo player, famous--mystery. Think he find answer to one question of player."

"Huh?" Hikaru said, not having understood in the slightest.

Isumi rose from the goban to stand over Waya, Hikaru following, and pointed to the screen where what looked like a completed game from NetGo was displayed. "Player famous--mystery," Isumi repeated, pointing to a side box containing Japanese characters much resembling chicken scratch to Hikaru's eyes. "Here ask question..." He paused a moment, mouth working on translating, forehead wrinkled into a frown. "...What always come toward, but never reach?"

"Kami no Itte!" Waya yelled triumphantly, at the same time Hikaru automatically said, "Tomorrow."

He looked at Waya, puzzled; both Japanese boys looked at him, making him switch his attention to both. "Uh... what's always coming but never actually arrives; tomorrow. It's a riddle."

He knew it because it was one of the riddles he'd looked up when practicing translating with the ghost's help during its games.

"What's kami-thingie? Doesn't kami mean like god?"

"Hand of God," Isumi said, slightly distractedly, still looking at him. "Best Go game--Waya think mean Hand of God, all player try reach, but never reach."

Waya, with a scowl, had spun around in his computer chair and brought up another page showing another game and more incomprehensible text. He jabbed a finger at it and spoke rapidly to Isumi.

"What kind circle not round?" Isumi translated, looking back to Hikaru along with Waya. Nase was observing with silent interest, still from her place by the goban.

"Uh..." That sparked recognition also, though it took a moment to reword it into its original phrasing, and Hikaru thought, uneasy but not acknowledging it, that he really should have put more thought into how well the riddles he'd chosen would translate between languages. "Ring, what kind of ring isn't round..." A boxing ring. Which might be an American-only sport, he suddenly realized, alarmed--he really hadn't put any thought at all into those riddles when he'd stuck them up for all the world to see. But why were they such a big deal? "Uh, circle, ring, um, sphere... ball... h-hoop... nope, no idea on that one."

Instead of trying to look convincing and probably failing, he leaned closer to the computer monitor and tried to distract them. "So what's up with this? Riddles on a Go site?"

"Jaro," Waya pronounced, giving Hikaru another stab of alarm even though he already knew that. He continued indecipherably; then, at a jab from Isumi, stopped and presumably repeated, very slowly and with what would have been embarrassingly small words if that really wasn't about the limit of Hikaru's comprehension (and even then guessing a bit based on context), "Jaro new player, very good. Never lost, only one--" Something to do with time?, couldn't mean loss... Hikaru suddenly remembered that Jaro had timed out on a game once, when Sai first started helping him learn Japanese, and refocused with faint relief in time to understand, "No one know who Jaro is."

"Why would that be a big deal?" Hikaru asked as casually as he could, genuinely wondering. Had he let Jaro move up to Elite too

quickly or something? These people were seriously trying to put that much deeper meaning into *riddles* ? "It's a website, nobody knows who anybody is--there's a bunch of people here who're really good."

"Know who some are," Isumi told him seriously. "Some pro player here--Jaro play them. Very rare player from nowhere beat pro player. So people wonder."

"Pros?" Hikaru squeaked, astonished. *Pros* played NetGo? His ghost from his backyard shed had been playing Go online against professionals and *beaten* them? That was a little more evidence than he'd intended of an online sensei to point to if it was ever necessary!

"And what about those riddles then?" he asked, trying to collect his thoughts and figure out what to say or not say. He clearly hadn't paid enough attention to how Jaro's introduction had affected the site.

Isumi shrugged. "Must mean something. Mystery. Why say riddle, why nothing else? What mean?"

Oh, they'd *never* believe that was a random kid's Japanese practice if they were working out meanings like 'perfect game' from 'something that never comes,' Hikaru thought faintly. What had he done now?

He cleared his throat. "Erm, just out of curiosity, exactly how big a deal is this Jaro player? How many people could possibly be interested in this?"

"Whole site," Isumi said promptly, then, as if that weren't bad enough, added thoughtfully, "Maybe whole Go Internet."

Crap.

In which Hikaru finds a family legacy

A/N: I'm sooo sorry, people; yes, I completely forgot about posting this chapter until now... I was kinda basically playing WoW all day (it's addictive once you get back in, I swear). I'm not really satisfied with this chapter yet either, the whole Japanese/English speech seems really clumsy to me... *sigh* maybe I'll come back and revise. Suggestions welcome.

It's funny how it actually seems harder to focus and write in summer vacation now that I've got so much nothing to do... but I still wouldn't trade it for the world. :D I'm FREEEEE *dances around* (in my head, because it's kinda late to be doing that kind of thing where I am ;P) Huge appreciation for everyone who reviewed, and if I start getting a little later replying from now on it's because I'm actually spending quite a bit less time on my computer now that I can do other things like read novels and play video games for as long as I want, not because I'm less appreciative. But you guys should review more anyway, so I'm encouraged (/reminded) to write more and get back to a faster updating schedule! ;D

Oh yeah, almost forgot to mention--new (minor) character introduction in here...

Stepping Stones

~ **16** ~ In which Hikaru discovers a family legacy ~

"Goals," Hikaru muttered to himself, glancing out his window at the innocuous shed still sitting in the backyard just like always. He flipped pages in his tired translation dictionary, back and forth and back then forth. "Makes things easier if you set goals on what to learn... one conversation at a time..."

He thought he really understood what Danielle had meant now. When she said goals made learning easier, what she was really talking about was *motivation*. Hikaru had set himself a goal, a very specific one, that he'd work on until he mastered half the entire language if that was what it took...

Single-minded, he studied his book. It didn't matter if the knowledge only stuck for the short term or not. He had a lot of possible words and phrases to memorize and he wanted to get them all down and be able to speak them perfectly.

"Hikaru."

Hikaru glanced up from his plate warily. Dinner had become a more silent meal than usual ever since his father had changed his schools on him, even after the tutor--not that Hikaru was still holding a grudge or anything, he wasn't like that, but... well, no reason to be all nice and forgiving either.

"Your mother and I already discussed this earlier," his father continued after a short pause, clearing his throat. "We're going to visit your grandparents sometime this week."

Hikaru sat and blinked. After a moment he asked, "I have grandparents? Didn't they die when I was like two?"

"Those were my parents, honey," his mother said mildly.

His father nodded shortly, looking uncomfortable. "Your Japanese grandparents. We've been... estranged from them as a family for... quite some time."

"Why do we want anything to do with them now then?" Hikaru asked, sticking a random forkful from his plate into his mouth. He thought he should probably feel more involved, but he wasn't sure he felt anything about it one way or the other. He'd gone thirteen years without any rememberable grandparental influence already, and he

had American relatives he saw on holidays and stuff. These people were strangers.

"We live in the same country again," his father said stiffly. Hikaru maturely didn't point out that they'd been living in the same country again for over half a year so that was hardly a reason. "Your grandparents are traditional people. Circumstances are finally such that..."

"We should all be able to get along," his mother supplied with a wry smile after a moment of heavy silence. Hikaru wondered why his father had brought it up when he apparently couldn't even talk about it very well.

"What's that supposed to--" Hikaru stopped eating and scowled briefly. "Oh. Nemmind."

His father scowled back at him even more briefly, probably because of his lapse of diction, but composed himself at a discreet, visible nudge from his mother's elbow. Hikaru kept sulking. He hadn't even met the only grandparents he had left for over half a year just because he couldn't speak their stupid language?

Maybe it was the grandparents' fault, if they were so traditional. Like he needed even more relatives disapproving of him.

"Why don't you help me clean up tonight, Ru?" his mother remarked, rising from the table. "Honey, are you finished?"

His father nodded, muttered something about some work to get done, and headed away toward his computer. Hikaru absently started collecting plates and utensils and passing them to his mother. They worked in silence for a few minutes, putting away the leftover food, while Hikaru adjusted to the unexpected announcement.

"So... why exactly are we 'estranged'?" he finally asked. "I don't think I remember them at all."

"Well, his parents didn't exactly approve of his transfer to America back before you were born, and even less of his marrying me and staying over there indefinitely."

Hikaru blinked. "How could anybody not like you?"

She smiled. "Considering they've never met me, I believe it was more the fact that I wasn't Japanese, and wasn't very interested in becoming so."

"Then why are we--"

"Things change, sweetie." She looked at him compassionately. "Don't fret about it. Grandchildren are generally soft spots even if there are problems between the parents and grandparents."

Hikaru just grimaced and finished clearing the table. He made enough trouble for himself on his own; why did he have to get dragged into other people's messes too? Even if they were family?

"In here." Hikaru remembered to smile at the little Japanese kid he'd managed to lure off the street as he approached the shed, having successfully bargained a candy bar in exchange for a quick visit to play a game. His goal was almost complete. He'd been pretty confident about everything he'd said and the kid had said, and the kid hadn't looked at him funny for his Japanese once.

The kid looked around curiously as he entered the shed. Hikaru held his breath, watching Sai from the corner of his eye as the ghost started and fluttered at the new presence. The kid didn't react.

"Here's the board," Hikaru recited cheerfully in Japanese, swallowing his apprehension and pointing to the goban. The kid looked at it dubiously but sat down on one side. Hikaru gestured as subtly as possible to Sai to sit down opposite.

The ghost did so. The kid kept looking at Hikaru.

Sai glanced at Hikaru, then, with a hesitant expression, extended the fan and tapped a standard opening move. Clear, obvious, couldn't possibly be missed without being blind.

"You gonna come play or not?" the kid asked impatiently in hard-to-follow Japanese.

Hikaru sighed. The ghost silently bowed its head and withdrew from the goban. For whatever reason, Hikaru was the only one who could see the presence in his backyard shed.

Crap. So much for possibly introducing Sai to his friends to explain Jaro...

Hikaru resisted the urge to tug on his collar, reminding himself again that he was perfectly comfortable in his clothes. It was just something about having the grandfather he'd never met before looking at him from the seat across from his while his grandmother presumably entertained his parents in conversation. And his mind was empty of all the Japanese he'd theoretically learned so far, which made it even more unfair that his mother didn't seem to be having too many problems. Since when had she been studying it?

Glancing around the room in an attempt to find a distraction, he was surprised to notice a goban in one corner. He turned back to the grandfather--his grandfather--and addressed him for the first time since introductions, distraction making him forget his self-consciousness.

"You play Go?" he asked haphazardly in his developing second language, pointing to the board just to be clear.

His grandfather's weathered face developed an expression of something like interest. " *You* play Go?" he returned in deliberately slow Japanese, surprise evident.

Hikaru shrugged, reminded of his recent failure of a game with Isumi and how out of practice he had to be. "Some," he said, hoping he chose the right disclaimer.

His grandfather gestured him firmly toward the board. "Let us play."

The grandmother and his parents glanced at them as the two moved to the board, faintly surprised expressions on his father's and grandmother's faces and a smile on his mother's. Then Hikaru sat down, swallowed his nerves, and forgot them. He played.

Somewhere in the back of his head Hikaru expected to have to leave it unfinished, since Go games could run for quite a while sometimes and they surely wouldn't stay long enough for a serious one, but any conscious concerns of time quickly faded and he actually played two full games before he even thought about it again.

It was... relaxing, in a way, to play his grandfather, but stimulating at the same time. He suspected that the old man was going easy on him in the beginning, but that was fine with him, because it took him a little while to ease back into the views and twists of mind that let him play Go effectively. Isumi had been too serious, too fast; Akira probably would have slaughtered him; but his grandfather didn't really matter anyway so he didn't feel under pressure playing.

The old man made occasional sounds while they played, sometimes just grunts, sometimes sounding pleased or impressed. Hikaru found himself grinning occasionally in response as he resettled into his usual playing mindset. He even tried playing a couple of his usual kinds of 'mistake' traps.

His grandfather fell for one, then smartened up and spotted the second. Hikaru was indignant when he seemed to step into it anyway and then somehow managed to turn it completely back on Hikaru with an out-of-the-box move he hadn't even seen the possibility of. He gaped at it for a second before remembering his dignity.

The old man uttered a smug syllable Hikaru was too preoccupied to process. Hikaru scowled at him and ordered himself to pretend he was playing the ghost. What was the best trap he could play against Sai at this point?

"Poor idea," the old man pronounced when Hikaru played his next hand, jabbing a wrinkled finger for emphasis while Hikaru started. Hikaru looked up at him indignantly again. He no longer noticed the deliberately slow speech--it was actually helpful, whether it was meant to be condescending or not. "You try again when I still expect it? Can you think no further?"

"I haven't played in months!" Hikaru retorted, before remembering to convert it--choppily--to Japanese. He didn't care how well or properly he did, though. He didn't like thinking that the old man was right.

"No excuse," came the clipped, implacable response.

"You'd be--you" what was the word for expect, "look whole game if I wait now!" Hikaru insisted, and fell back to real words again. "Now you're expecting it!"

The old man gave him an almost shark-like smile. It needed no words to say 'of course.'

Incensed, Hikaru stuck out his tongue at him, unable to come up with any more eloquent comeback given his limited vocabulary. The old man laughed unexpectedly, reached across the goban and ruffled his hair.

"Good boy," he remarked, while Hikaru was ducking away and attempting to smooth his hair out. "Good to see the talent passed down."

Hikaru stopped smoothing, surprised. After spending so much time spent working against the ghost, it had never occurred to him that any of his skill might be hereditary rather than learned.

"How good are you?" he asked, paying careful attention to getting the question how he wanted this time, genuinely curious about the answer.

The old man shrugged deliberately, then stretched. "Amateur Meijin title."

"Really?" Hikaru blinked, checked his memory, and smiled slowly. That was the same first tournament he'd won, apparently so surprisingly. Maybe he should bring the trophy over if they visited again. "Hey, Gramps..." He placed another stone, nonchalantly. No reason to wind down their game. The Japanese words came surprisingly smoothly and presumably correctly when they took second place in his attention: "I want practice more again."

He peeked up through his bangs, biting his lip to keep from expressing too much too soon. "Would you maybe help?"

"What's this--?" 'Gramps' sounded strangely foreign and garbled when spoken by someone who didn't know English. Hikaru sighed and thought rapidly on the translation.

Okaa-san was mother... oto-san was father... o-... crap, crap, crap, he'd *studied* it... ojii-san was gramps! Unless it was grandmother. What was the other one?

"Ojii-san," he said, not willing to guess any longer. He had a fifty-fifty chance anyway.

The old man grunted, sounding pleased. Hikaru guessed that he'd remembered the right word and tried to keep looking casual. "How good you think you are?" the old man returned, placing his own stone.

Hikaru slapped down his next and jumped to his feet, pointing and crowing, "HA! You fell for it! You fell for it! *Got* you, Gramps!"

The other adults all swiveled and stared at his jubilation, heedless of cultural differences or suitable behavior in company. Thankfully, his grandfather just sat back and laughed, apparently good-humored about having fallen for another trap (even if it wasn't really complete), this time not on purpose.

"Hikaru! Behave!" his father hissed, looking pained.

Hikaru plopped down again cross-legged, still beaming.

"Brat," his grandfather remarked. "Yes. You practice hard, I teach you."

"I'll *beat* you," Hikaru declared, on fire with success, still forgetting to translate. "Let's play!"

His grandmother and parents shook their heads with varying degrees of tolerance for his enthusiasm and turned back to their own conversation. Hikaru didn't even notice, his whole mind once again involved in the game.

In which Sai is introduced to Jaro

A/N: Here we go, newest chapter hot off the presses! *grin* And I actually did just finish this within the last half hour, so please excuse any small grammatical errors anywhere--I figured you guys would rather get the chapter now than wait another couple days for my normal more thorough proofreading. Especially since this one features... *drum roll* the first real conversation (sort of ;D) between Sai and Hikaru! *bows to imaginary audience*

Okay, yes, I'm a little high right now... oh, and if anyone can tell--yes, this chapter was written with access to my JSL book from the library again. I think it makes better content than having to sort of vaguely guess my way along multi-language conversations. Also, just in case of inaccuracies, how Hikaru's conversion software works is basically completely made up (especially since I think most web browsers can actually do translating on their own... but I needed more than that). :D Enjoy!

Stepping Stones

~ 17 ~ In which Sai is introduced to Jaro ~

"So let's see..." Hikaru enabled the newly installed conversion software for the first time and navigated to NetGo, curious to explore the mostly-Japanese site for real since having first accidentally discovered it back in the American school. "Hey, check it out, Sai, they've got forums..."

The ghost leaned over his shoulder and observed equally interestedly as the new page loaded even though it wouldn't be able to understand the now-English text. Hikaru paused before he started skimming the forum thread titles and played around with the new web browser options instead until he figured out how to switch

between English and Japanese easily. Then he went back to the actual site... and groaned.

"They've got an *entire forum* on you? The *top* one?"

Sai asked a question, and Hikaru clicked the forum link before switching it to Japanese so the ghost could read too, waiting impatiently until he could take another turn and start reading some of them, though one glance at the top thread titles almost convinced him to hit Back and pretend he'd never seen or heard any of it. *Who is Jaro?*, *Everyone with Jaro kifu post them here*, *Opponents of Jaro?*, *Jaro riddles*, and *Best Jaro game?* scrambled into lines of tiny characters, and Hikaru heard the ghost emit a startled sound even though he didn't turn his head to look at its reaction.

His peripheral vision, and the still not-quite-subdued instinct of something coming at him, alerted him to Sai's fan prodding at his shoulder anyway. "*Jaro-san... kore wa desu ka?*"

"Uh... who's Jaro?" Oh, great. How was he supposed to explain that with the simple words he knew?

Then he brightened with inspiration, opened his Notepad program and typed, 'Jaro is your name when you play online.' Then he clicked again to convert it to Japanese, the letters having still shown up English since he was using an English keyboard.

The ghost made another startled sound, this time also sounding impressed, when the words changed and leaned a little further over Hikaru's shoulder to read them, then pulled back a little and looked down at Hikaru with evident surprise. Operating on a hunch, Hikaru opened the Character Symbols box in his computer and set them to kanji, grinning smugly to himself when Sai immediately made a pleased sound and started pointing the fan at different characters. Hikaru obediently inserted them all into the text file, then closed the dialog box and re-converted.

' *I am Jaro?* ' the converter translated.

"Hai," Hikaru agreed, grinning again with slightly foolish success at the first ever English message he'd gotten from the ghost. "Hey, Sai, we're communicating!"

He typed that in and translated it too, feeling even more successful when the ghost grinned delightedly back. Deciding he felt like celebrating his so-far brilliant idea, he went back to the web browser and switched to a search engine, locating a new Japanese site that allowed two people to play Go against each other from the same computer if they wanted.

"Here, you go first," he allowed generously, gesturing to the familiar empty grid after confirming with a glance that the default settings for time limits were fine.

Sai indicated a placement, and Hikaru clicked for it and then concentrated on the virtual board himself, wondering vaguely if playing online against an opponent right beside him would feel any different from his old online games or his tutoring-battles on the goban behind them.

He made his own first placement, and was startled by the ghost's sudden exclamation rather than the studious seriousness it almost always seemed to regard the other online games it played with. It gestured generally at the laptop screen with an eagerly flicking fan until Hikaru, at a guess, brought up Notepad again, then made an impatient sound that prompted him to open the kanji box again.

Translated--into slightly imperfect English, but Hikaru figured that was only to be expected from software rather than a real fluent human no matter how good it was--the ghost had just suffered the revelation that all its other online matches had been against people too rather than simply from a magic box. Now Sai wanted to know where those other people were since it still couldn't see them and the magic box wasn't big enough to hold anyone.

"Oh, boy." Hikaru sighed and rested his forehead against his hand, trying to decide how exactly to best explain the Internet to a ghost

who'd lived in a shed for who knew how long and was apparently perfectly willing to believe in things like magic boxes instead of computers. "Have you ever even noticed, like, airplanes going overhead? Weird metal birds that are actually miles and miles high instead of just tiny that make funny sounds and all? Whaddaya think those are, magic origami or something?"

Sai just made an uncomprehending, slightly petulant sound.

"Okay, okay..." Hikaru sighed again and scrubbed at his forehead, then started typing out the most basic description he could think of for technological magic boxes. "You see... um... it is a magic box, see, that works like... well a bunch of people have them, and--what you put in one can--pop up in another, yeah? So we're just using the same one right now, but..."

When he tried converting, one glance at the ghost's face made him grimace and start typing it again, this time trying to think of more precise words and phrasing that probably stood a better chance of translating accurately. After a moment of a slightly dubious expression, Sai nodded and appeared to accept it. Hikaru blew out a silent breath of relief and went back to their online match, which they had left with all of one stone each on the board already.

Two hands later Sai paused again and indicated him to go back to Notepad, then through text asked for further clarification of the whole Jaro thing they had just been investigating a little before. Hikaru reluctantly went back to the NetGo forum on the unfortunate mystery player, almost whimpering in dismay when they started reading the first topic together (switching back and forth between languages a few posts at a time), and realized that some people were so interested in the Jaro phenomenon that they were actually talking about things like watching other Go sites for players with Jaro's style and tracking IP addresses to try to figure out where Jaro played from and possibly narrow his identity down from there.

"Crap, crap, crap..." Hikaru chanted to himself, almost moaning, while Sai alternately blinked or smoothed his face in surprise.

' *I am Jaro?* ' the ghost reconfirmed through the conversion, beginning to look almost as disconcerted as Hikaru when he nodded, ' *This is all about me?* '

"Stupid fanatics," Hikaru grumbled, settling for complaining about the hubbub since he had no idea how to try to control it. "It's just a stupid game, haven't any of these people ever heard of having a stupid life?"

For courtesy's sake, at Sai's questioning glance, he typed 'They're idiots' for him, then reluctantly pulled himself together a little and added after that, 'It's such a big deal. What should we do?' before hitting Enter like he always did in chatrooms and then converting it.

The ghost tapped its chin thoughtfully with its everpresent fan, looking slightly hesitant, before finally shaking its head and directing him to compose a line that translated to, ' *Is this bad?* '

Hikaru squirmed. "Well... I dunno exactly... it is if we don't want the attention."

With clearly visible unhappiness, the ghost then slowly composed, ' *Should Jaro stop playing?* '

Hikaru stared up at it, surprised into speechlessness by such an offer of sacrifice, considering Sai really had no life beyond the game besides seeming to adore it. 'No, no,' he quickly typed, moved beyond his own harrassed thoughts without even consciously realizing it in response. 'We'll... figure something out. Jaro still plays.'

The ghost looked so relieved and grateful that Hikaru briefly thought it might hug him if it had been corporeal. That made it a good thing it wasn't, of course, but he still tolerated the idea so well that his spur-of-the-moment promise solidified in his own mind and he resolved to start figuring out how to keep Sai playing even with all the trouble his play was causing. There had to be some way of controlling it.

But for now he didn't want to worry about that. He tabbed back to the halted Go board before bringing up Notepad once more to type. "But let's just play again now, okay? It's been ages. Don't you want to groan over how stupid I've gotten before beating me back into shape?"

"Well, kiddo, good news and bad news." Danielle handed back the essay in romaji Hikaru had clumsily put together and given to her during their last session--English (or whatever now) wasn't his best subject even if he tried his best--and looked at him perfectly calmly while Hikaru tried to hide the slight apprehension those words caused.

"I'm still doing okay with progress, aren't I?"

"Yup." Before he could feel relief or wonder what was wrong then, she said, "In fact, I think you're about ready to go back to school."

Hikaru blanched. He knew it, and he didn't care, as his mind scrambled busily to put together the most logical and persuasive arguments he could come up with as to why he definitely shouldn't in the shortest amount of time possible. His tutor just laughed.

"Don't panic, Hikaru, I know you have bad memories from before but I honestly think you can handle it now. That's not to say I'll quit, of course; you're still going to need just as much help with your homework and all, but I think you've learned enough to be able to sit through classes without feeling totally lost and to be able to interact a little with your classmates if you want. They can probably be a lot of help by now in improving your vocabulary."

"But... but..." Hikaru protested, still trying to find reasons to put it off.

Danielle just shook her head deliberately. "Nope. You know you have to do it sometime anyway. If you want some advice on how to make the transition easier, concentrate on the kids in your English class--they're most likely to be able to talk a little of your lingo, and why not

trade homework with them some to make friends, help each other out?"

Hikaru unhappily swallowed down his instinct to resist, unfortunately able to see the logic in her suggestion, but that didn't mean he liked it or wanted to try it. "You don't mean like *now* now though, do you?"

Oh that didn't sound whiny at all. Not that he wasn't willing to shove dignity under the bed for a moment if it granted him a reprieve.

She gave him a knowing but tolerant grin. "Why don't I suggest to your parents going back after New Year? That seems like the best time, at the start of a new term and all."

New Year's. Well, that gave him a few more weeks, and she was right that he was stuck for it sometime... reluctantly Hikaru nodded, then took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Dang. He was going back to school... while his friends were going to be getting to play Go every day instead, and getting paid for it. Briefly he wondered if his father would have let him drop out of school entirely if he had taken the pro test thing with Waya and Isumi, maybe if he used the argument of getting a steady job, even starting a career, so young and starting toward supporting himself... nah. His parents probably wouldn't have let him do that even if he'd already mastered Japanese beforehand.

A new thought suddenly occurred to him, and he immediately resolved that he was going to make sure he didn't look like all the other kids at his school when he had to go back despite his previous agony at standing out, and he fell to planning how exactly he was going to get that accomplished this time. Over six months since the first time was past due, really; he'd just gotten so used to it he'd forgotten about it. He didn't quite trust his own proficiency in communicating to be enough to avoid mistakes yet; Danielle was great, but it was still his parents who paid her so it was safer not to even mention it to her; Isumi was still busy with the pro test, so it was probably better not to ask him...

"Hey, Akira!"

Akira looked up, startled out of his reverie over the goban, and stared blankly at the equally surprised customer in front of him for a second before swiveling around and attempting to restrain the exuberant other boy for his inopportune timing despite his pleasure at his keeping his word of coming again. "Hikaru, I am playing--"

"You can finish that later; c'mon, I found a place online that has hours listed but I got on the wrong train accidentally so we don't have that much time now--"

"Hikaru!" Akira hissed again, flushing slightly from embarrassment, and started to apologize to the dumbfounded customer, but Hikaru grabbed his arm and half-pulled him out of his seat before he could finish, probably helped by Akira's being too surprised to react.

"Sorry--gomen," Hikaru called over his shoulder at the old man as he dragged Akira toward the salon entrance. "I want to get this done today, before I forget and spend the money on something else--"

" *Gomen nasai*," Akira corrected furiously, before calling back a more formal apology helplessly, "Sumimasen!"

"He can play you any time," Hikaru dismissed as they reached the street outside, still hauling Akira along by the arm. Akira wondered, still mortified and with some anger, if the ex-American had any idea that the customers in the salon *paid* to play him rather than simply bursting in whenever they felt like it like a certain someone. "I didn't want to tell my mom what was I doing since she might tell my dad and he can't tell me not to after I've already gotten it done, so I can't be gone long, and like I said I already got lost just coming here since I wasn't paying attention--"

"Hikaru!" Akira exclaimed for the third time, jerking to a halt and yanking his arm out of the other boy's grasp but refraining from

straightening his sleeve as he wanted to, even if he wasn't quite sure why. " *What* are we to do?"

Hikaru stopped and blinked at him with a slightly innocent expression. "Didn't I say? I need to you to come with me to get my bangs re-dyed."

Then he grinned mischievously. "Hey, you could think about getting something done while we're there too--ever thought about shocking everybody with green hair?"

In which Hikaru boosts Jaro's reputation

A/N: Not much action this time, but to make up for it... an evil cliffhanger. :) Anyone who missed Hikaru's American friends, though, rejoice (partly)! And this is the first chapter posted after being reviewed by my excellent new summer beta, attackfish, who has an advantage over me in actually knowing some of the Japanese language and culture and who I am hugely grateful to for the assistance. :)

Toddling off to bed now... since the old man next door has finally stopped playing his bass music (after midnight)... *shakes head* Gotta love neighbors.

Stepping Stones

~ **18** ~ In which Hikaru increases Jaro's fame ~

Hikaru wandered randomly around the streets of Tokyo, hands stuck in his coat pockets, feeling like hiding somewhere from school looming even if he would never admit it. On autopilot he scanned shop signs as he passed them, trying to recognize any of the characters (and failing) and then glancing in their windows to try to figure out they were, vaguely thinking about Go salons and what Waya and Isumi might be doing with that pro test. One of the stores he passed seemed to be a coffee shop, or what was it--a cyber café. Hikaru considered for a moment, then wandered in, successfully transacting the fee required for computer use, and settled in one corner where no one could look over his shoulder. Maybe he should go online and play some Go; he hadn't done that for himself much since his laptop had pretty much permanently transferred out to the backyard shed rather than his room.

He didn't really feel like playing Go, though, didn't think he could concentrate on it very well, so instead he found his hands directing

him on their own to the chatroom he used to use so frequently with his old friends in America. He remained doubtful about the wisdom of signing in there even as he did so, despite the apology he had sent them, especially since he hadn't gone back since. But he signed in anyway and then sat back and waited a moment, briefly wondering what time it was across the world, and the screen informed he had one friend currently online.

Hey Ru, Ami posted a moment later.

Hey Ami, he posted back, abruptly nervous and hoping she wouldn't be holding a grudge just because he'd been a brat.

So how's it going over there?

Well, that could have an accusing tone or it could not. *Kinda crazy*, he typed. *You want to hear it all?*

Sure .

He took that as encouraging rather than neutral or sarcastic. Ami had always been the most level-headed, willing to forgive, of the four of them, although she had always said he was. *Had* --he hadn't seen her in over half a year; she might not be the same anymore. *Well, I'm finally learning Japanese*, he started to type, but then realized he didn't really want to talk about that. So he backspaced, then instead confessed, *Well, I screwed myself up pretty well, and don't have a clue what to do. You remember my Go ghost--*

Then he paused, added a question mark, and hit Enter.

Yeah, Ami posted. *Kilimanjaro, right? Or did you switch to Fuji?*

Actually, his name's Sai, Hikaru typed automatically, then stopped, decided to leave that be, and continued, *Do you really believe in him? I mean, it? The ghost?*

There was a pause before her reply appeared. *Well... I don't know, Ru.*

He sighed and closed his eyes, but when he opened them she had added, *Let's pretend I do though and go on. I'm suspending all disbelief for the moment.*

With Ami, he remembered, that really was practically the same thing as her believing, so he leaned forward and started summing up the inadvertant mess he had created by letting Sai play online. *These people are obsessed, Ami,* he ended with a whine that he didn't bother about since the bare words could be interpreted as a statement. *They were talking about tracking my IP address! They can't really do that, can they? They couldn't tell my laptop's mine?*

Depends on their computer skills, Ami posted back not very encouragingly. *I don't know if it would be legal, but... why not start playing from different PCs rather than just your laptop? Find some Starbucks or whatever equivalents and go online from there, that would make you one of a million people in Tokyo it could be.*

Sai's stuck in the goban. I can't haul that around into random stores, Hikaru posted, scoffing. *And I sure can't afford to buy a million different computers and haul them into the shed either.*

Oh, yeah, Ami posted. *Why's he stuck in the goban?*

Hikaru paused. Blinked. *Uh... I don't know. He just is. I guess he haunts it. I know he is though, I tried to get him to leave once and he literally couldn't get like six feet from it.*

Weird, Ami posted. *Yeah, I guess that's out then. Why not set up a system with those Go friends of yours to use different PCs, like you give them the account password and then text them Jaro's moves and they text you the opponent's?*

*I haven't *told* them!* Hikaru typed immediately, horrified. *They'd think I'm nuts! Seeing a ghost? A Go ghost?*

Right, but you're not worried about me thinking you're nuts, Ami posted. What's the difference?

Hikaru hesitated, but couldn't come up with any real reason not to tell her, especially since being in America she was probably too far away to call a shrink on him. They could come over and find out the only one who can see him is me, he posted miserably. I tried seeing if a neighborhood kid could once. Seems like he would've reacted if he had.

That's Sai, Ami posted, confusing him for a moment. I'm talking about Jaro.

But they're the same!

But only you know that. If you don't want to tell them the truth anyway why not make up something about Jaro being paralyzed or something so you play for him, and now you want help protecting his identity 'cause he doesn't like attention? Pretend they're some grownup you don't want to talk to; you get creative enough when you're doing that.

Har de har har, Hikaru typed, even though he couldn't exactly argue with that. I dunno; that would be... weird. I get nervous when I lie.

Oh, still no better huh? Ami posted. Well... I guess I could always ask around school or something on the IP thing. I'm sure there's a way to hide addresses if there's a way to find them, and there are plenty of geeks at my junior high.

That'd be great, Hikaru typed gratefully. While you're at it, know any good riddles?

Uh... riddles?

For Jaro, he confessed. Ever since I found out people are dissecting them like that I haven't been able to come up with a single one without thinking about how they might interpret it and then thinking

it's no good and then thinking what if they start coming up with conspiracy theories instead about why Jaro's not posting any more. I'm driving myself nuts.

Ami posted three laughing face emoticons in a row, which Hikaru did not take to indicate sympathy.

You should stick with total silence, she posted a moment later. I wonder how long it would take his disciples to decide it was because they hadn't been interpreting his wisdom accurately and what they'd do then.

Funny man, Hikaru typed, scowling.

Girl, she posted back promptly.

If these disciples find out who I am they might start stalking me for his wisdom! What the heck am I supposed to tell them?

Just put up whatever you would have before. Or forget about it and let them make of it what they will, Ami posted. *Get off defense and go on offense. You play soccer anymore?*

Not really, Hikaru posted, dubious at her advice.

Well you used to, and you sure wouldn't like this. You're letting these people hem you in and you're trying to back up instead of blowing through them. Stop worrying about what they think! If you're freaking out because Jaro beat some pro, go online as Jaro and challenge the best pro out there! Sheesh, Hikaru, unless you really changed that much since you moved be yourself!

Hikaru sat and blinked dumbly at the screen. He could almost hear Ami berating him, probably because she tended to hoard exclamation points for only places with most meaning. Three in a row?

On a whim, he typed */poke*, an old game among the four that Trey had started for finding out moods and smacking sense into each other when they weren't in person. Ami promptly posted back */smack*, followed by a smiley face.

Hikaru grinned. *Okay, okay. Hey, thanks for forgiving me, Ames, he posted. I know I already said sorry before, but...*

Was that what that was? she posted, causing him to frown. *I tried Googling some of the characters, but you used weird ones. How'd you learn that so fast anyway?*

I didn't, I've had Sai help me with all that, Hikaru typed, bewildered and increasingly chagrined. *You mean--oh geez, I seriously used kanji?*

Yep, she posted.

He blew out his breath in a sigh. *Crap. Sorry. Well, that's what it said, basically just sorry. I kinda got really focused learning Japanese for a while when Dad switched schools on me. If it makes it any better I totally forgot about all the people I've met here too.*

Only you, Ru, Ami posted, with another smiley face. *Honestly, I can see that happening. And I already decided it's okay by me.*

Huh? Hikaru posted, truly surprised. Level-headed was one thing, but he'd still expected to have to grovel.

Well... I tell my friends you're my overseas penpal now. Which is true now that you're actually writing again, she posted. Hikaru sat and stared at the screen blankly for a moment, first thinking it would make no sense to tell Trey and Jamal that and then realizing that she must have made new friends.

Girls? he posted, detachedly curious. It didn't hurt as much anymore to think that things had changed for them too, and at the moment he

still felt slightly relieved she was willing to talk to him as if almost nothing had.

Yeah. I've actually met some who aren't so bad so far, Ami posted, again with a smiley face. *We get together during lunch and snicker at all the preppy girls' outfits that probably took hours to put together. I don't go to the same junior high as T and Jay anymore.*

You didn't move, did you? Hikaru posted, wondering if her parents possibly could have pulled the rug out from under her feet like his had. She wasn't chatting with him from the Congo now, was she?

Nah. My dad got a pay raise and there was an incident with one of the seniors getting pregnant, so my parents decided to switch me to that all-girls' place down the block, she posted. *So now I just hang out with the boys after school most of the time.*

Oh, Hikaru typed, lacking anything else to say. *Hey, you think it'd be a good idea to get them online now so I can apologize to them too?*

There was a pause before her reply appeared, which made his heart sink uncomfortably.

Maybe not now, she finally posted. *I know Jay was still kind of mad at you last time he mentioned.*

Hikaru winced, though he couldn't honestly protest he didn't deserve that. But even with a little more distance and new people he'd met, Jamal had still been his best friend since he was nine.

Sorry, Ru, Ami posted.

Yeah, he typed. *It's okay, really.* Now he just felt like hiding from thoughts of school and of America, even though irrationally in general he felt better. *I gotta go, but... talk to you later?*

Sure, she posted. *Hey, next time tell me silly stuff about the culture and language and all. I want to hear about all the dumb things you've*

said to offend people.

I haven't, he posted indignantly. Geez, why would I want to make more trouble for myself? One of the first words I learned was sorry!

Hikaru glared at the goban in front of him, in particular the offending stone his grandfather had just placed. But his grandfather was glaring at him, and he had a pretty stubborn look that suggested he might not just let it go and keep playing unless Hikaru took back the muttered comment that should have fallen under the right of free speech, so reluctantly he sighed, "Gomen."

His grandfather only frowned.

"Sorry!" Hikaru repeated, lapsing into English, but feeling slightly inclined to sulk. What more did the old man want? "Okay, so maybe it was rude--I said gomen!"

The old man looked sterner, then started lecturing him in Japanese he could understand less and less as he reacted on what sounded like a million different specific versions of just saying sorry, of which gomen was apparently the least appropriate for everything.

"Aw man, I already have a tutor," Hikaru groaned, not even bothering to try to translate. "I'm only here for Go, Gramps! Can't we just play?"

"You speak sloppy," his grandfather said firmly, and then just to further insult him indicated several stones on the board pointedly. "Your play sloppy. You will improve both."

"I'm amateur Meijin just like you were!" Hikaru retorted, this time cobbling it together in Japanese. Which probably emphasized his grandfather's point about his speech, but he didn't care about that.

"You're losing," came the implacable reply. Hikaru stewed, unable to truthfully deny that. The old man had gotten him with a series of

hands almost as clever as Sai's--he hadn't been paying enough attention to every possibility, since no one was as good as Sai.

"I thought grandparents were supposed to be nice to their grandkids," he finally grumbled also in Japanese, crossing his arms childishly.

"Grandchildren are supposed to please their grandparents," his grandfather returned.

Hikaru scowled, focused, and slapped down a stone, only to have the old man smack at his hand and scold him for disrespecting the gamepiece. "And sit in seiza!" he added just as Hikaru was opening his mouth to complain again.

Hikaru closed it, glared at him suspiciously, then asked in the best Japanese he could, "This is for-my-own-good stuff, isn't it?"

"Better." His grandfather patted his head--then smirked. Hikaru was hard pressed to keep glaring rather than show any amusement. With greater restraint, he picked up his stone again and set it down gently in the same place, but he didn't change his cross-legged position.

"Seiza is stupid. I refuse to do things just because other people do."

"Seiza demonstrates respect. You ever play a professional, you sit in seiza," his grandfather commanded.

"I'm not sitting in seiza."

"It is the mark of a true player who can sit in seiza through a whole game."

Hikaru scowled at him, fighting the immediate instinct to switch positions just to prove that he darn well could sit on his legs through a whole game if he wanted to. His grandfather smirked at him again, then ruffled his hair.

"Stupid Gramps," Hikaru muttered, switching to English, smoothing his hair out again. He was vaguely surprised the old man hadn't fussed at him for his new bangs, especially since his father had started and then given him a dark stare but said nothing.

His grandfather gave him a look he was rapidly coming to recognize.

"Alright, alright, gomen--I mean shitsurei-deshi-whatever!"

His grandfather started the whole lecture on apologies all over again. Hikaru wound up--complainingly--making even more effort to learn those than he did with Danielle, realizing that he had better start actually learning them just because he literally wouldn't hear the end of it until he did.

"Okay, Sai." Hikaru took a deep breath, positioned his fingers over the laptop keyboard, and let out the air in his lungs in a *whoosh* .
"Here we go."

With the ghost observing and the conversion software active, he logged into NetGo, navigated to the forums, and began composing the first ever message from Jaro, taking the greatest pains he could with Sai's help to make sure it was grammatically correct and proper word choices in Japanese. When he finally finished and clicked Post, holding his breath again, the new thread appeared, announcing in plain text no different from the titles below it,

Jaro challenges all pros.

In which Hikaru questions Sai's past

A/N: First off, my sincerest apologies that this chapter is so much later than usual. The only reason I have to offer is "writer's block sucks." Really. XP

Fortunately, though, I have finally brainstormed my way through it (with much useful feedback from my lovely beta), so we should be set for another nice long run before (I mean *if*) this happens again. :) And to get back into things--may I present for your reading enjoyment the obliviousness that is Hikaru. Yes, you may throw things. Although I doubt bricks would penetrate his skull. ^_^ Also, new characters!

Stepping Stones

~ 19 ~ In which Hikaru questions Sai's past ~

"Hey, Sai. What's up with you haunting a goban?" Hikaru idly wondered aloud, placing a stone on the board between them.

The ghost just gave him a petulant scowl, presumably either because he wasn't paying appropriate attention to their game or because he couldn't understand the question, and Hikaru wished briefly for the ease of communication with his laptop. He was currently doing his best to pretend his laptop no longer existed for the moment, though, so that was out. The quality of Jaro's online opponents had actually dropped dramatically since they issued their challenge to the good ones out there. Hikaru couldn't tell if the ghost was heartbroken about it or just pouting like a five-year-old, but for himself scorn had done an excellent job replacing the last vestiges of his fear and he was determined to get those players to do what he wanted somehow--exactly how was a bit iffy, but he'd think of something. Stupid faceless online population.

But for the moment he just sighed, summoned his patience and organized his garbled double vocabulary, and repeated the question in Japanese.

Sai gave him a surprised blank look. Hikaru resisted the urge to drag out his battered old translation dictionary, determined to get through one conversation with the ghost without having to revert to a hunt-and-point approach, even if for some reason it was harder to understand than most of the other people he'd tried talking to.

But finally the ghost started picking through an answer, suddenly looking preoccupied and distant as though he had forgotten he was actually talking to Hikaru at all, which Hikaru pieced together as involving the goban, Sai, a "hokano igo no sensei" which he interpreted as just 'Go teacher' and someone named Shuusaku Torajiro. He also thought Sai mentioned "Heian," which he was pretty sure was some old period of Japanese history, and wondered if such a childish spirit could really be that old if it meant it was from that period.

"Oh," he said, when the ghost finished, feeling that that had not been particularly revelatory or even interesting. "So you just kinda hang around playing with people who find you or something. Okay."

He went back to the game, no longer curious. Sai gave him an annoyed look, probably because he couldn't understand the English and Hikaru didn't bother translating. Or maybe the ghost's backstory was more interesting to itself--definite difference from real people then.

Then again, it lived in an old storage shed. Playing and remembering games probably really was the most fascinating its life got.

Hikaru shook his head to himself and resolved to somehow definitely get real pros involved in Jaro's online challenge. Maybe take the poor thing out for soccer-dodgeball again too, just to give it some fresh air. Or did ghosts even breathe...?

Briefly, the teenager thought about asking the spirit 'How did you die?' But that had probably been extremely traumatic--who would want to remember *death*, after all--and even Hikaru wasn't that insensitive. "C'mon, let's keep play--"

A sudden rapping on the shed door interrupted him. For a second both Hikaru and Sai sat there staring at each other in surprise, then Hikaru got up to open it, thinking it must be his mother and wondering what she could possibly want. She'd always treated the shed as his private clubhouse before.

But it was the neighborhood kid he'd lured in before to test Sai's visibility standing there, with another few kids behind him. "Hey," the lead kid said bluntly, in Japanese of course, which Hikaru automatically tried to concentrate on understanding even though his mind had gone blank. "You playing that game? They want to learn it."

Hikaru considered for a second, wondering if he had heard right. "'Scuse me," he said even though they wouldn't understand English, closed the door, turned and grinned at the ghost hovering by the goban, looking on with an anxious expression. "Hey, Sai," he said nonchalantly. "Wanna teach a bunch of squirts Go? I can place stones and talk for you."

It was the perfect distraction to get the ghost's mind off their recent less than stellar online matches, maybe even enough to let Hikaru start using his laptop again without having to move it back to his room or feel guilty. Assuming Sai had any teaching ability, of course. But Hikaru could probably help out a little there if need be--it had been sort of fun lecturing those bunny insei that once a while ago.

Sai said something uncertainly that sounded like a question. Hikaru almost didn't even mind having to translate himself to Japanese again, so pleased was he by his new idea.

The ghost's face bloomed into thrilled disbelief and it started chattering a mile a minute, waving its fan around every which way.

Hikaru opened the shed door again, smiled genially down at the gaggle of kids, and told them cheerfully, "Sure, come on in."

There seemed to be a lot more kids around his age running around everywhere in Tokyo, which made Hikaru slightly nervous until he realized that what with Christmas and New Year's coming up their school system must have some kind of winter break just like America's. (That probably also explained, come to think of it, why he seemed to keep hearing the same annoying music here and there and all the new little traditions his father seemed to be putting around trying to set up--not that Hikaru had been paying any attention.) He relaxed further when he realized that with all the other kids around no one was paying any attention to him, so he was even almost able to feel cheerful as he headed toward the Go institute despite their presences reminding him of his impending return to school.

Then, of course, he found that he hadn't paid enough attention and gotten off at the wrong station--again--only after walking several blocks in what probably would have been the right direction to reach the Institute and therefore planting himself smack dab in the middle of unfamiliar territory. He set off to find another station, grumbling to himself in a mix of English and the few Japanese swear words he took great pains to never practice at home.

He therefore assumed it was the English that attracted the attention of the group of girls sitting outside a restaurant when he noticed them glancing at him and chattering to each other, but instead of pretending they didn't exist and just walking by he stopped suddenly and stared. He was, in fact, so moved that he actually approached them voluntarily just to make sure, gesturing to the beautiful golden arches behind their table with breathless hope, "Mickey D's?"

"Makudonarudo," one of the girls agreed, making the familiar word sound weirdly foreign with Japanese pronunciation, looking like she was suppressing a giggle. The others at the table definitely were. "Amerikajin desu ka?"

"Ye--hai," Hikaru agreed. For the first time he realized he was speaking with Japanese kids his own age who didn't know English, not to mention being girls, but that made it a bad time and place to lose his cool so he just went with the first thing to pop into his head. Which was introducing himself. Danielle had actually specifically taught him how several times, even though he'd never used it with anyone else. "I'm Hikaru--Shindo Hikaru desu." No *-kun* when referring to himself, and was that one phrase 'pleased to meet you' or 'how do you do,' and why did they have to sound so different... "Hajimashite?"

A couple of the girls giggled again, but they all looked fascinated. Hikaru wished, probably for the first time in his life, that they thought he was cute or something rather than an exotic zoo specimen. But he was still communicating, apparently successfully, which was cause for celebration all on its own.

No, wait... darn it. He'd forgotten a syllable in there somewhere, whichever phrase it was. No wonder they were laughing at him.

"Hajimemashite," the first girl replied with a smile that didn't seem *too* amused, and then they all introduced themselves before he realized that was going to happen and so he only caught pieces of their names. The first one started with Fuji, which unfortunately distracted him by reminding him of Sai, but he was pretty sure her first name was Kari. Since he figured he couldn't make any bigger a fool of himself he tried repeating their names and getting them corrected, in the middle of which he somehow wound up sitting down with them in an extra chair beside A -kari, drinking a triple thick milkshake despite the cold weather that sent him into heavenly bliss and wallowing in beautiful fantasies of endless hamburgers, french fries, and *ketchup* . Even though he really was still heading to the Go institute.

"You go to Haze?" he fairly confidently understood one of the girls (Kumiko, unless that was the one sitting beside her and she was Naara) ask when they were done laughing at his mangling of their names. He blinked in surprise, recognizing the name as that of the school he was being consigned back to after winter break was over.

"Wait-- *you* guys go to Haze?" he asked in return, dumbfounded. He couldn't possibly now be sitting and getting along with some of the kids who had made his life torture there before, could he?

The girls just giggled again, of course--honestly, they were reminding him why the only girl he'd ever actually liked was Ami, but he was still too pleased with his interaction to mind.

"American!" one of the girls (Suzu) repeated in a triumphant sing-song tone, as if she had just won an argument.

"You're the transfer," another one half-checked, half-explained to him, which unfortunately suggested that the students still remembered his disastrous first try at attending. He'd been trying to convince himself that no one would.

"We thought you were..." Akari confessed, before adding a word that he could only guess translated to either 'cool,' or 'stuck up,' both of which made no sense, and then looked at him with something weirdly like shyness. "Transfer from America, your--hair--" she gestured toward his bangs, "--never talking to anyone. You don't know much Japanese?"

"Nope. Only the very basics," Hikaru agreed, relieved and incredulous. They hadn't realized he had no idea what any of them were saying? Wouldn't that have been obvious when the teachers had dragged him up in the front of the class each first time and made him stand there in hideous silence for a moment when he was presumably supposed to have been introducing himself?

"Oh, you're fine," one of them encouraged, followed by another's, "Keep trying." The third, who he noted as probably the most honest one, told him, "Your accent is bad," and Akari, beside him, suggested, "Are you coming back soon? We can help if you need it."

"Thanks," Hikaru told them, gratified, mostly just because it would be nice to recognize friendly faces when he had to go back in the classrooms. Even if they were girls. "Yeah, I'm going back after New

Year's, but I'm a little busy now... do you know where the nearest train station is? Back down that street?"

They corrected his guess, with slightly complicated and confusing directions given at least two of them seemed to be talking at once around each other, but Hikaru finally got free of their company and was on his way again, mind already refocused, this time resolved to pay closer attention to the right stop to get off at. The location of the McDonald's, though, was already permanently seared into his memory at the same level as Shangri La. He could stop by again on the way home and get a Big Mac for dinner. Then he could find a reason to go out tomorrow morning and get a bacon egg and cheese for breakfast... or pancakes... oh, pancakes... *syrup*...

The receptionist lady at the Go institute, rather than kindly ignoring Hikaru when he arrived, actually took notice of him the first time he hoped she wouldn't to tell him, "Food and drink only allowed in the lunch room."

Hikaru gave her a very insincere smile meant to indicate that of course that was where he was going and hurried on up the stairs, clutching and sucking on his milkshake possessively. He felt a bit like a baby with the straw clamped between his teeth, but that wasn't nearly enough to make him let go of the first true sugar rush he'd gotten in heaven knew *far* too long. Then he wandered around, having to duck to the side every time an adult passed who might have noticed his milkshake and therefore, of course, getting lost. He might have felt slightly grumpy wondering why a Go building had to be so big anyway if he'd been operating on his usual priorities, but as long as he was still holding Mickey D's Golden Arches between his hands everything else was just petty, earthly concerns.

He discovered a new room as he surreptitiously poked around for anything familiar, and was drawn in from sheer curiosity when he discovered shelves upon shelves of what appeared to be records of some kind--if they were accounting type stuff, why would there a whole room full of them? And why not organize them in filing

cabinets or electronically? Just further proof of Japanese old people following tradition instead of getting with the times?

He pulled one paper out a little at random to see what it was, and was instantly hooked. A Go game--a finished one, judging by how full the board depicted was, and with the moves apparently labeled to explain the order every stone had been placed in. It took a little work to figure out the system, but Hikaru barely even noticed. What a great idea, recording matches. Was the entire room full of Go records?

Reluctantly, but far less reluctantly than he would have been just a moment before, Hikaru sucked on his milkshake hurriedly one last time, registering the slurp of air as his cup emptied, then set it aside by the door and wiped his hands on his jacket. He couldn't get wet fingerprints on the paper; whoever noticed was sure to want to kill him. Maybe these were pro matches documented here; maybe he could get an idea how he really leveled up to them. And pick up a few tricks to try against the ghost to maybe actually give him an edge for once. And Sai--he could probably tell if Sai could beat the players too, surely? and maybe even figure out if Sai's best opponents online even were pro level.

Hours later, Hikaru's stomach finally prompted him to leave behind the game records for a while and he managed to wander, not into any area he recognized, but into Waya. "Konnichiwa!" he said cheerfully, at which Waya grinned and replied something he couldn't focus hard enough to catch.

"I was looking for you, actually," he continued, guessing the subject, not bothering over the language barrier for once since his mind felt it needed to rest after concentrating so long. "Didn't have anything in particular to do--" originally, anyway, "--so I thought I'd drop in and see how that pro test thing is going for you guys. You must be done by now, right? How long is it supposed to be again? I was thinking about it and I can see maybe taking all day for a test, but unless it's like a series of them..."

Waya knuckled his head, which made Hikaru automatically duck and scowl, and slung his arm over Hikaru's shoulder as he sauntered into a hallway the younger teen thought might be sort of familiar. A moment later Isumi approached, looking first surprised and then pleased as he spotted them.

"Konnichiwa!" Hikaru repeated.

"Is evening now, Shindo," Isumi remarked with a polite but suppressing-amusement expression. "Better to say 'konbanwa'."

"You can tell me, and I bet I'll totally not remember this time tomorrow," Hikaru said with undaunted cheerfulness. "My brain is not taking lessons right now. I'm starving. You guys wanna head to this McDonald's I found if you're done here? My treat even."

Waya and Isumi both readily agreed. Along the way to the station Hikaru asked again about their pro tests, and received an unapologetic snort of laughter from Waya and another valiantly attempted but unsuccessful suppression of amusement from Isumi. "We explain," Isumi assured him while Waya was still laughing, before Hikaru could grow annoyed if he felt like it and contemplate doing something to get him back. But then, instead of doing so, he glanced around and asked, "Where are we going to?"

"Mickey D's," Hikaru reminded him. "You'll love it. I found one at... ahm..." He managed to remember and pronounce the directions successfully, which made him proud of himself.

Isumi looked slightly puzzled. "Okay, but is one closer."

Hikaru came to a dead stop. "What? There is? There's more than one? You guys know McDonald's? Could I have been getting real food all along if I'd just known to go looking?"

Isumi tried to look apologetic and just related the conversation to Waya instead of answering him.

"Why didn't you ever say ?" Hikaru demanded petulantly, not wailing but only by force of will.

Waya just started laughing at him again.

In which Sai sets up house

A/N: *Cough* Uh... I'm alive? And I finished this story (it only took... damn, six years?), so I'll try to post a chapter or two a week now until it's all up. We're about halfway through at this point.

Also, I came up with an indicator for whether characters are speaking English or Japanese: "double quotes" means English, 'single quotes' means Japanese. Let me know if that works/sucks/isn't noticeable/jars too much? I may go through old chapters and edit them to have the same thing, but I have no idea if that would swamp people with alerts or anything.

Stepping Stones

~ **20** ~ In which Sai sets up house

"I've got to run to the store for a few things, Ru. Make sure you leave in the next few minutes to catch the bus; better to be early than late," Hikaru's mother called.

"I'm almost ready," Hikaru yelled back from his room, stuffing his last notebook into his backpack and shaking the bag to make its contents settle, all the while telling himself that he was not nervous and had no reason to be nervous and everything was going to be *fine*. Then he shook his bag harder to make its contents settle better and slung it onto his back, heading to the hall to stuff his shoes on. "See ya later, Mom," he called, distractedly pleased when his voice didn't betray his agitation, and headed outside toward school.

Halfway through the yard he stopped, his last sentence suddenly replaying in his head, and then turned around and jogged over to the shed sitting innocuously as ever behind the house.

"Hey, Sai, I'm not going to be around today until later, okay?" he informed the ghost as he poked his head around the doorway. "I've

got to go back to school again, so..."

The spirit nodded and smiled from the far side of the goban with the same polite, blank, vaguely hopeful expression it usually seemed to wear when it didn't have a clue what he was saying. Hikaru sighed, quashed the ball of nerves roiling in his stomach again, and went for the laptop because he didn't have time to try another unassisted conversation unless he wanted to risk being late-which he really really didn't, even though he really really wished he weren't going.

It didn't make him feel any better when Sai's face fell as soon as he translated his message, especially since he probably should have remembered to mention the imminent change in schedule a little sooner. He'd mostly tried to just keep it out of mind as much as possible until now.

Now he unexpectedly felt guilty. He'd been spending hours every day in the shed playing Go with Sai lately; what was the ghost going to do now until he got back home?

"But here, you can-" he started to offer, and then stopped before he even finished opening a new window in the browser as he realized the idea wouldn't work. "Crap." YouTube couldn't provide hours of entertainment unless the immaterial ghost could click to play more videos, which, of course, it couldn't.

Then he brightened. "Hey, Mom just left, so she won't notice-c'mon." Hikaru closed the laptop, grabbed the goban, and hauled it outside again just like he did to give Sai some fresh air-except this time he instead carried it further, into the house, where he plunked it down in front of the television set.

"I'll keep the sound low, so maybe Mom won't notice and you can watch longer before she turns it off. She's out of the house pretty often," he informed the spirit as he grabbed the remote and started flipping channels, trying to find one that looked likely to interest a Go-obsessed possibly thousand-year-old ghost. Sai just stared at the changing screen in fascination, momentarily even forgetting to spout

questions. Hikaru chalked up another positive aspect of constant TV watching and grinned as he found what looked like some Japanese period soap opera with the characters wearing outfits that resembled Sai's.

"Okay, here you go. Have fun. And I gotta go now, so I'll see you when I get back, okay?"

The ghost called something after him as he ran for the door, presumably either a thank you or some question, but Hikaru just waved one hand vaguely without pausing in answer as he left. He really needed to get to school now-but for some reason it took a little while before he remembered how nervous he was (or rather *wasn't*) again.

"Hey Akira. Did you know that pro exam is over-no, well, I guess you probably would know-did you know Isumi passed? Only *three* people get to! But anyway, now he's going to be playing an actual pro as a pro himself soon; I was thinking it might be kind of cool to watch. You interested?"

"Konnichiwa, Hikaru," Akira responded, striving to act nonchalant even though he was acutely aware of having an opponent sitting across from him again. After the success of the last time he'd tried pointing that out, though, he only did his best to pretend everything was perfectly normal and not get embarrassed. "You are not practicing Japanese today?"

The blond-banged boy rolled his eyes as he flopped into an empty chair at Akira's side and dropped his backpack on the floor, apparently still not noticing that Akira was in the middle of a game. "After how much there was in school, I can't take anymore right now. At least I'm still alive so far though. Why can't the whole world just speak English? Anyway, you wanna check out Isumi's game?"

"Ano... I do not know Isumi-san much," Akira began carefully, trying to work out how to phrase a polite explanation and refusal, but

Hikaru-unsurprisingly-misinterpreted.

"Oh, yeah, I've never really introduced you guys, have I? Well, don't worry, you both know Go and you're really good so I'm sure he'd be glad to get your opinion after he's done. Waya'll be there too, so we can all three watch and go over it with him afterward if he wants. You could tell me exactly what Waya keeps muttering he's going to do to the guy who got third so he can take his place-I think it involves a dark alley and a blunt instrument, but Isumi just laughed when I asked. And then I think Waya said something about a hole in the ground instead. I swear he keeps changing what he says to me just because he thinks it's so funny."

Akira kept a smile fixed on his face through Hikaru's carefree chattering, but inwardly felt like he was dying a little inside with being in such a situation in front of an audience. Especially when he could see in his peripheral vision his opponent's eyebrows rising higher the longer Hikaru went on.

"I... will try," he finally hedged, knowing he was lying but unable to come up with a convincing reason he couldn't attend on such short notice. Going with no reason but Hikaru's invitation would be unbearably awkward. He'd have to find some unavoidable commitment at the same time as the former insei's shodan match.

"Okay. Ah, I gotta go, my gramps demanded another game today and my tutor's coming over later to make sure I don't fall behind on my homework from the start," Hikaru sighed, grimacing as he glanced toward the clock on the wall.

"You are playing again?" Akira asked, so surprised and pleased that for a moment he forgot to be self-conscious. Hikaru had promised to catch up to him, and for a second Akira had hoped that was why he was there when he'd first heard the familiar American English again, but to hear that his (hopefully) future rival was actually working on fulfilling that promise... it suddenly made him feel much better about having to wait longer.

"Yeah. Stubborn old geezer." Hikaru rolled his eyes, but rose and slung his backpack over his shoulder. "I'll see you around, okay? Have fun beating another no-name," he finished with barely a glance at the game in progress on the goban or Akira's opponent. Akira winced as the other boy blithely headed out of the salon, not even waiting for a return farewell.

"Interesting acquaintance," Ogata nine-dan observed with a too-amused smile as the bell over the door chimed to signal the teenager's exit. In perfect English.

Before Hikaru's inadvertent self-introduction Akira might have mentioned him as his semi-rival and, possibly, a friend. After the conversation just witnessed, though, Akira could only try not to wince again and offer weakly, reverting to his much more comfortable tongue, 'He can really be much more serious than he seems.'

'If *that* boy can play Go, our world would wind up turned on its head,' Ogata responded sardonically, and placed another stone on the board.

Since Akira really couldn't say anything to refute that, he just tried not show any more embarrassment and refocus on the game.

"What was that thing in the living room doing there?" Hikaru's father asked unexpectedly over dinner.

"Huh? 'S'my goban," Hikaru answered, too startled to put any real thought into his reply.

"It must be more comfortable indoors than in that shed you had it in," his mother agreed placidly for him. "Frankly I'm surprised you've lasted out there until now."

"Uh... yeah," Hikaru mumbled, since he returned the goban to the shed as soon as he got home and didn't have any intention of just leaving it around except when he was gone. It would just be *weird*

having a ghost sitting in his living room when he was eating dinner and in his room and all. Although he could see watching TV with it sometimes being okay.

Preoccupied with such musings, he barely noticed his father murmur into his plate, "Hadn't realized your grandfather left it here."

An elbow nudged Hikaru's arm, startling him out of his reverie into noticing the teacher's incomprehensible drone again, and he glanced to the side to see Akari giving him the same look as last time when she'd warned she wouldn't copy her notes for him if he didn't at least pay attention on his own. He had to work very hard to suppress a scowl at her-she was being extremely nice to him, going way out of her way, and it was help he could really use... but darn it she was *annoying* .

He halfheartedly started noting down the occasional words and phrases he could understand again, which after a few minutes led to speculating on what could fill in the missing pieces of the lecture, which led to drifting off entirely...

Nudge.

Darn it...

'Sorry,' he grumbled to her once break started, in Japanese of course, purely because it was the polite thing to say. He didn't sound very convincing even to his own ears, but apologizing was evidently the right tack to take with girls.

'It must be hard,' Akari sympathized, apparently forgiving him that easily after turning his arm black and blue. She leaned sideways closer to his desk and tilted her head to look at his open notebook. 'What is it you keep-?'

He assumed her last word meant doodling. 'Uh, it's called Go,' he explained, forgetting some of his irritation in sudden discomfiture.

The last thing he needed was to be labeled a geek at the school he already despised. 'It's a game...'

Which he'd apparently been studying so many kifu of that now he was copying them whenever he had a pencil in hand and wasn't paying attention. Though Go was way more interesting than school.

Akari made an interested noise and kept looking, so, somewhat surprised, Hikaru turned his notebook so she could see it better. 'How is it you play?' she asked.

Hikaru blinked, but she still seemed interested, so he picked up his pencil, flipped to a new page and quickly started scribbling down a grid while he explained, hesitating only over the language, 'Well, there's two players, black and white...'

The break seemed far too short compared to the others so far, but at the end Hikaru had managed to impart the basics of gameplay and was refereeing a simple little illustration of a ko attack, Akari playing white with her own pencil, and his mood had much improved. Of course, it started dropping as soon as her first nudge, but this time when he glanced over she gave him a little smile along with the look.

Hikaru felt so much better as to make the face he'd been dying to at her, before resuming the cycle of kinda-sorta-taking-notes-okay-not-really...

Maybe she wasn't quite so bad after all. The kids in the shed were okay, but they were Sai's; Hikaru was too busy placing stones and echoing the ghost's words as carefully as possible to really be able to participate in those sessions himself. It was actually pretty fun instructing someone else.

Ami, help! Hikaru posted, for once glad that his ghost definitely couldn't read English.

What? What's wrong? she posted a moment later. *Did something happen?*

This is totally unfair, I swear I shouldn't be punished for trying to do a good deed nobody else ever would, he typed, relishing the ability to complain in the maximum capacity of his *real* language with someone who'd understand. *I'm not any good as an interpreter of modern society for the spiritual otherworld!*

Hikaru, stop being a drama queen, Ami posted back. *Now what's up?*

I figured since I'm stuck in school again I'd be nice to Sai and give him some entertainment while I'm gone, Hikaru sulked. *So I introduced him to TV-and now the stupid ghost wants to know how the people got in the box, why they're there, how come they never notice me, why they're so small, how all the different backdrops are in there, why they don't know they're being watched-*

Ami posted so many laughing faces they ran onto a second line.

In which Sai leaves

A/N: I regret nothing. :D (The movie mentioned, by the way, is *Search ing for Bobby Fischer* .)

Stepping Stones

~ **21** ~ In which Sai leaves

The TV was on when Hikaru wandered from his room toward the kitchen for a snack. He stopped and watched for a moment, then asked his mom, "What's that?"

"It's about a chess prodigy," she replied, turning the volume down a little. "I thought it looked interesting."

Hikaru stood there for another moment, then moved to the sofa and sat down beside her. It hardly looked great, but interesting, yeah, especially compared to homework. And it was in English. He could call watching it Japanese practice since his mom had subtitles turned on (which he proceeded to ignore).

A while into the movie his mother got up, said something about shopping or food, and left. Hikaru barely noticed. Not until the movie ended did he finally stretch, blink at the clock, and resume his original wander toward the kitchen. Then he went outside instead.

"Hey Sai, come check this out," he puffed, hauling the goban the by now practiced route to in front of the TV.

For his company's sake, Hikaru dug out the remote and played with the settings on the DVD menu until he'd gotten it to replay in Japanese with English subtitles, and then they both settled back raptly.

The ghost *loved* the movie. It cheered on the prodigy kid, peering at the chessboards often (Hikaru figured it was probably trying to figure

the game out, since it wasn't Go), frowned anxiously when the adults talked about whether to push the kid or not, and *blew up* when the one idiot mentor told the kid he had to have contempt for his opponents to win. Hikaru had disagreed with that line too, but he didn't start actually yelling at the screen for it. He fell back on the sofa laughing his head off when Sai did, complete with fan waving and jabbing.

When it was over again Hikaru hauled the goban back to the shed, mindful that his mother would probably be back soon, and since he was in a good mood set up a game for himself and the ghost.

"So if I'm the kid, you'd be one of the mentors, but which one?" Hikaru mused as he set down a stone. Sai gave him a querying look over the board. Hikaru rolled his eyes just a tiny bit and rephrased himself in Japanese while the ghost indicated its move.

He thought about it, but neither mentor was obviously like Sai, so he shrugged and dismissed the comparison from mind. It was more interesting to think about the chess moves and strategies discussed in the movie and try to figure out if any of them could possibly be adapted to Go-which answer seemed to be not really, especially in Sai's opinion, if the lectures and fan swatting at his head when he made some weird moves were any indication.

But it was fun. Hikaru finished that game, not especially upset that he'd been trounced, and cleared the board for another one. Maybe if the ghost currently believed he'd suffered a head injury, if Hikaru played really really sneakily well, he could actually beat it.

Hikaru was showing Akari how to count territory, once again illustrating with scribbles in his notebook, at a table outside the main school building when someone suddenly interrupted. Hikaru looked up when a shadow fell across his paper and then leaned back, trying to be subtle, from the boy on the other side of the table who was staring at Hikaru's notebook like he might snatch it and jabbering way too fast for Hikaru to have a hope of understanding him. He

turned to look at Akari. Akari appeared to be concentrating on what the boy was saying, with a polite smile and occasional nod.

Hikaru sighed and paid more attention himself. After a few minutes, while Akari started talking back, he figured out that the boy was so excited because they were two other people who were playing Go. He wondered if the guy knew there was an entire professional league-thing-of people who did nothing but play Go. There was no way Hikaru was telling him, though, not when he was this hyped about a couple of schoolkids going over the basics.

The boy's name, when he calmed down enough to introduce himself and Akari remembered that Hikaru probably hadn't followed most of the conversation, was Tsutsui. Hikaru immediately thought of Suzu, a random girl from his class, and knew he was going to pronounce the boy's name wrong at some point. Maybe they wouldn't notice.

They probably would. Why did Japanese names have to sound so similar?

Oh well, nothing for it. "Hajimemashite," he said politely, with a slightly faked smile, and skipped the name thing entirely for now.

Tsutsui might or might not have actually responded-or maybe he had before Hikaru-as he was busy sitting down with them and pulling something out of his school bag. Hikaru's eyes widened in interest when he realized it was a miniature Go board. "Are those stones magnetic?"

Tsutsui beamed at him. Hikaru grinned back, snagged the board closer to him and Akari, and started snapping the pieces onto it while resuming his broken explanation of territory with the much better illustration.

Before long Tsutsui started chiming in, then after Hikaru finished took over the board and started laying out small series of hands that needed a particular placement of the last stone for that color to win. Like training exercises. Hikaru nodded in approval and solved them

all while explaining the placements to Akari. Rather than jumping in again when Hikaru tripped over the words or his own tongue, Tsutsui just beamed harder.

Hikaru kicked at his shin under the table and half-ordered, half-gestured to set up the next problem. Akari looked lost when Hikaru solved it, even after his explanation. So he took the board and tried to set up a simpler one himself.

Akari got it in five seconds and Tsutsui had a pained grimace as he stared at the tiny cluster of pieces in one corner of the board. Hikaru scowled at him and spent at least five minutes thinking up a better layout, which Akari proceeded to solve in ten seconds. Tsutsui winced. Hikaru sulked but gave the board back, kicking whenever Tsutsui started getting too complicated for Akari to follow.

Tsutsui started giving him would-be-glances-if-Japanese-people-weren't-so-polite and continuing with the complex hands anyway, then shoving the board toward Hikaru. Fair trade, Hikaru decided, and solved them before shoving it back and gesturing toward Akari, who Tsutsui set up the next one for. It was still a little disconcerting how happy the older kid seemed through it.

Akari just smiled and asked questions, though, so Hikaru ignored the weirdness of his companions in favor of what they were doing. Who'd've imagined he'd ever find the opportunity to play Go at school. He might almost not hate the place quite as much at this rate.

Hikaru got off the bus humming the theme song to some random anime, and spotted a ball by the sidewalk some neighborhood kid must have left out. He thought maybe it was that squirrely one's who took lessons from Sai, and that kid usually came from that direction, so... He kicked it along, then started dribbling it from one foot to the other as he went. Maybe he'd happen across the kid before he found his own house. At least he'd probably leave it closer to the kid's place than it was before.

Hikaru recognized his own backyard a few minutes later, so he planted the ball in the grass for the kid to find next time he passed by, slung his backpack over, and hopped his fence. The ghost's face showed up behind the shed window as he crossed the yard, looking so bright and cheered and smiling at him that there was no way Hikaru could just ignore it even though he really didn't have time to visit.

"I have a dog," he remarked aloud to no one, and waved back as he changed course. Maybe he could just show Sai the last really clever trick of Tsutsui's he'd solved that he honestly hadn't thought was possible.

Sai solved it in about half the time Hikaru had, if Hikaru had only taken two minutes (not like he'd been counting). Hikaru told himself he was too mature to care, especially when the ghost bounced in place over the problem and immediately waved its fan at him to set up another one.

"Well-but I've gotta get to Gramps'..." Hikaru hesitated, glancing outside at the sunshine and then back to the eager uncomprehending spirit. Sai looked so *happy*... "Oh, darn it."

Maybe he could carry the goban with him, say it was because he... played best on that particular board. Even though he'd never needed it before. Or he was... sentimental about it or something. Yeah, if he were an idiot. Besides which it'd get freakin' heavy... but if he took the bus... or he could just be late to his gramps', or skip it and make an excuse, or...

The ghost peered at him from behind the fan with huge, hopeful eyes.

Hikaru sighed. " *Darn* it. C'mon." He unloaded his backpack and stuffed the two pots of stones inside on the bottom, where they were least likely to jostle or spill, then piled his schoolbooks and stuff back in and heaved it onto his back. Just the pots were heavy, this was so not worth it. And everyone on the streets and on the bus would stare

at him and whisper behind their hands because he was going to look *loco* .

Hikaru stood up, shrugging his shoulders to get his backpack to sit as comfortably as possible. The ghost watched in confusion, looking from him to the golan and back again.

"Come on. You need fresh air. Sunshine's good for the soul and all that bunk. Up and at 'em, seize the day."

Hikaru bent, hefted the golan with a groan of effort, and dragged it toward the door. Sai scuttled after him with an alarmed expression, hiding himself behind his fan as direct sunlight hit his not-really-there skin. Hikaru got the golan to the side of the shed, where it sat when they played dodgeball, and imagined carrying it further. Much, much further.

He thumped it into the grass with another heartfelt groan.

"This. is. *not* going to work. Screw seize the day. You sit here and sun, I'm gonna go beat Gramps, and I'll tuck you in when I get back. Sorry to disappoint. Try not to get into any trouble while I'm gone."

He resolutely avoided looking in the ghost's direction as he marched across his yard, because hurt confused *left behind* puppy dog eyes would break him, he knew they would, no human could possibly stand strong in the face of their power. It was nothing personal, but he'd have to steal some little red wagon just to cart the stupid board around and then he'd be breaking a real kid's little heart besides looking incredibly stupid and it wasn't like he could reliably explain himself if anyone took it upon themselves to ask 'hey you, what the heck...'

He slung his backpack off to toss it over the fence again, and almost dropped it because of the increased weight he'd forgotten about in his preoccupation. Sai exclaimed anxiously beside him as he barely caught it.

... Wait a minute.

Hikaru spun around and stared at the ghost, right beside him, and then at the goban, sitting beside the shed. That was like... twenty feet away? Thirty?

"Oh my god," Hikaru breathed. " *Sai* ."

He looked down at his backpack. With the go ke still inside. Well that was... the pots were part of the goban, sort of, they must be the original set to go with it; they...

"Oh my *god* !" Hikaru repeated. Then he laughed. "I can't believe we never thought of this before! C'mon, Sai, let's get to Gramps!"

He hopped over the fence with his backpack and turned around to watch Sai hover indecisively behind the barrier, staring at the wooden slats, fan twitching like a nervous tic.

"Sai! Come on! 'Bout time you get some exercise!" Hikaru ordered, grinning.

The ghost jumped when he called its name and hurried to his side, then froze again and looked around slowly with huge eyes than ever. Hikaru spread his arms out in a grand gesture.

"Welcome to the rest of the world."

For a second Sai looked a bit tearful as he continued to gaze around. Then suddenly he whirled on Hikaru and threw both immaterial arms around him, babbling away in his ear in the happiest, teariest, way too fast to remotely understand tone ever. It was a good thing his sleeves weren't real fabric or Hikaru would be suffocating.

They took it a few steps at a time to the corner of the street, just in case moving the pots of stones was creating some kind of dual pull and Sai might snap back to the other end of his tether suddenly, but

several minutes later they were out of sight of Hikaru's house entirely and the ghost was still beside him, not looking strained at all. Hikaru stopped for a second and surveyed him just to be sure.

'I think it really works,' he marveled, taking the time to say it in Japanese.

Sai tried to hug him again.

The ghost was hardly the most laid-back companion Hikaru had ever had to deal with, but Hikaru's good deed and brilliance left him in a good enough mood to be amused instead of annoyed at the ghost's endless, noisy wonder at the perfectly normal things around them as they walked along. Mailboxes: whisking fan and jabbering.

Pavement: improvised hopscotch while attempting to bore holes through it with laser stare. Somebody's *dog* : yelping and diving behind Hikaru to hide, even though Hikaru was only like half Sai's size and the dog didn't show the slightest sign of noticing him.

Granted it was a pretty big dog, but geez .

Fortunately, by the time they got to his grandparents' house, Sai had finally started to calm down. Hikaru supposed he ought to start taking the ghost for walks more often now that he could so maybe it wouldn't get so excited next time, then forgot all about that mental note as he kicked off his shoes and called out a greeting.

He half-expected Sai to start acting up as he sat down at the goban with his gramps, clamoring for a game itself like it always did in the shed, but the spirit surprised him. It folded down on one side of the board between them in silence, and then just sat and watched with an unwavering intent expression. That made it fortunately easy for Hikaru to tune out its presence and concentrate on the game rather than distracting himself by trying not to glance at the person only he could see.

After the game ended and his grandfather started critiquing his play, Sat started getting restless. Hikaru was even more grateful that it had stayed still during the game, because the ghost's twitching really

did make it harder to concentrate on what his gramps was saying. But, surprisingly, Sai still didn't interrupt.

Hikaru figured, as he shouldered his backpack and they headed for home, that the ants in the ghost's pants (or robe-thing, rather) had probably been from wanting to make its own comments and refraining, probably because either it knew Gramps couldn't hear it or it didn't want to distract Hikaru. Which was nice of it. He decided in exchange they could go over the game again in the shed, just the two of them, when they got home.

Because he was just a generous person, never mind that a little more Go sounded way more appealing than getting started on more endless Japanese practice/homework. Selfless and kind and happy to snatch any excuse for procrastination he could, that was Hikaru.

He and Sai settled back in the shed, the pots of stones unloaded from his backpack (thank god, the weight was slowly crushing him into a permanent hunchback), and Hikaru frowned deeply in concentration as he recreated the game he'd just played with his gramps stone by stone. Sai surprised him again by correcting one or two stone placements, almost as if the ghost had an even better memory for the game than Hikaru did. Which was possible.

Then Hikaru gestured for the ghost to start critiquing, and its fan snapped out and pounced on an early cluster of stones he'd formed near the beginning, and the usually playful ghost set into a rapid precise summation of cause and effect that pretty much started with "This was the *wrong. move* . But salvageable, if..."

Hikaru sat and stared. He was used to Sai lecturing as they played, which he only half paid attention to since he was always busy strategizing, which annoyed Sai into pronouncing him all kinds of hopeless and stupid and swatting at him with his fan while still suggesting alternate placements or forewarning how quickly he was about to die. But *this*... waiting a whole game through and then breaking it down move by move like this...

Dang . His ghost wasn't just good, he was *brilliant* .

After a few minutes Hikaru held up his hand and demanded, 'Wait,' then dug through his backpack until he found an almost-empty notebook and uncapped pen. He quickly settled back and started scribbling down everything the ghost said.

Then he dug through his backpack again and unearthed his battered translation dictionary, because he wanted to make sure he understood Sai's exact words, and wanted to make sure Sai understood his counterarguments beyond hand waving and huffing, because *that* move *was* better, if he'd just look at what happened there-

Hikaru spent way longer than he'd intended just going back and forth over that one game, jabbing at words in the book to emphasize points on the board and picking over every tiny detail of the ghost's expertise. The last word he looked up, hours later and late for dinner, was "awesome," just so Sai would understand when Hikaru told him that's what Sai was.

In which Hikaru joins a club

A/N: I try to give contextual clues for what language Hikaru speaks/hears, but if you want to be sure, "English" is in double quotes, 'Japanese' is in single. (Sai speaks in italics.) Please let me know any opinion you have.

Stepping Stones

~ 22 ~ In which Hikaru joins a club

"Hikaru, sweetie," his mother said mildly when he walked past her to grab a bottle of water.

Hikaru blinked. For some reason, her tone set off faint warning bells in his head. "Yes, mom?"

"Come take a look at this, please."

Hikaru did. She had all the bills spread out on the table in front of her, but he had no idea which one in particular she was holding and he was still a bit iffy on his yen to real money (er, dollars) conversion.

"Uh... lookit, money?"

"Money going bye-bye," his mother agreed. "More of it than usual. The only explanation for which I can think of is someone leaving the TV on for so long so often recently when no one else is home."

Aw, crap. "Um... I heard somewhere that subliminal... uh, listening can really help with learning a foreign language."

"While you're not here either."

"Just knowing it's on helps my mind be more receptive to new words and stuff," Hikaru said solemnly.

His mother smiled at him. "If our electricity bill isn't back to normal next month, you get to pay it off."

Hikaru peered at the numbers on the one in her hand again, suddenly much more motivated to figure out the conversion. *Oh, crap* . "You got it, mom. Scout's honor," he hastily agreed.

"That's my boy."

She returned to her billpaying. Hikaru made a quick escape from the house, then slowed and kicked idly at the grass as he shuffled on. Darn. Now what could entertain Sai while Hikaru was busy with school?

He spared a brief moment to hope the ghost hadn't gotten too attached to the characters in whatever soap opera it was following. Well, he could just tell it they all died in the end.

Hikaru watched the board on the screen for a moment longer, then casually slumped against the wall beside Waya, hands in pockets. 'So...' he said carefully, trying not to attract any interest from anyone else in the room since he was using the language they understood, 'you know Jaro?'

Waya immediately looked at him sharply, without changing his own half-interested posture. ' *You* know Jaro?' he returned, not looking at the screen even as Isumi placed another stone.

Hikaru only glanced at it. It'd be much easier just going over the whole game at once after it was done; there were such seriously long pauses between some moves that Hikaru couldn't help his attention drifting. Isumi was doing good though, especially since his opponent was a pro.

'I...' Hikaru shifted from one foot to the other, trying to figure out how to phrase what he wanted to say without revealing anything

incriminating. 'I... am thinking-' no, wrong word, '-wondering, why don't pros play Jaro?'

Wayu frowned a little, working his jaw in thought. 'Some pros who see, just say 'ah, arrogant' and move on. Some look, see Jaro would win, don't play. Most-' he shrugged, '-most pros old. Traditional. Don't look, don't hear, don't know.'

Hikaru scowled. His ghost had to be one of the best players in the whole freaking world, darn it, and it was past time he got a chance to prove that. Stupid old stick-in-the-muds. 'Why not learn?'

Wayu shrugged again. 'Old.'

Hikaru kept scowling, then made himself stop and resumed pretending nonchalance. 'I want to see pros play Jaro.'

'Me too.' Wayu nodded, looking at the screen again.

'So,' Hikaru prodded, slightly impatient that his friend hadn't already divined his meaning and jumped on board with the plan, and with his own lack of certainty in the conversation, 'you know pros.' Wayu opened his mouth, and Hikaru added, 'More than me. So, how we make pros play Jaro?'

Wayu frowned, looking dubious. He spent several minutes watching Isumi's game instead of answering. 'Can't just walk up and challenge them...'

Hikaru nodded. That wouldn't work; they didn't know who the pros actually were.

Wayu finally shrugged. 'Maybe just make more noise. More people talk, more people hear, eventually more pros think maybe worth looking.'

Hikaru pouted a little. That wasn't particularly helpful advice. "He already put an *I dare you* up to the whole world, how much more

noise can he make?" he grumbled, then when Waya looked at him askance grimaced, sighed, and forced his mind back into Japanese to repeat the question.

Waya rolled his eyes. 'Challenged like you, brat,' he snorted, which gave Hikaru an instant of panic until the older boy went on as though the comment was incidental, 'better to say, 'challenge me this date, this time.' Like real match. Then people plan to watch, tell others, they watch, talk about it like real match...'

"Huh." Hikaru considered. That was... pretty good advice, actually. What times would be best? Evenings? After most people got off work?

'Right people notice, maybe start talking in Go magazines,' Waya remarked. Hikaru quickly stopped him to make sure he'd understood the last word. 'Old pros not on NetGo read those.'

"Reeeeeaaally." Hikaru allowed himself an evil smile as he returned to contemplating the new plans hatching in his head. Those pros *would* play Jaro-and Hikaru would be sitting right beside Sai laughing at the old stogies getting their butts kicked by a player that didn't even completely exist. Really, Sai's genius deserved a little recognition.

For some reason that Hikaru hadn't bothered learning his lunchtime meetups with Akari and Tsutsui to chat about Go had shifted from a table outside to a small room inside that apparently no one else ever used. There was a handwritten sign taped to the door that he couldn't read except for one character he thought looked like the one for Go, and Tsutsui had started leaving his magnetic board out on the table when they left.

As long as they weren't hiding from detention or skipping classes without someone telling him, Hikaru was fine with it. (Actually, the skipping classes thing also sounded fine, so long as they somehow never got caught...)

He vaguely pondered the idea of bringing Sai's goban in sometime, just to show the other two the real thing, while trying to walk Akari through a real game without crushing her the way Sai first had with him. Tsutsui sat nearby, happily flipping through some incomprehensible book Hikaru suspected was about Go and giving Akari advice whenever she asked.

He'd just decided that such a field trip would almost certainly be too much for the hyperactive ghost to handle, especially when Hikaru would have to pretend it didn't exist instead of calming it down to avoid getting himself committed to psychiatric care, when the door banged open and all three jumped and looked up to face the intruder.

"Tsutsui-!" the new, bigger boy bellowed, immediately followed by a spate too rapid for Hikaru to really follow, but the gist seemed to be "ha ha, look at you little kiddies pretending to play your silly little game like it's important."

Hikaru decided he didn't much like this guy.

Tsutsui bristled and started defending their hangout, while Akari just sat there, head turning back and forth like she was watching the words bounce between them. Hikaru drummed his fingers on the table, waiting for the argument to end so they could get back to the game and pondering the likelihood of ending it sooner by beaming the guy with the little magnetic Go stones until he went away.

Probably wouldn't end well, but would it be funny enough to be worth it, and were there any exits that didn't involve having to get past him...?

The bigger guy went from denigrating them to boasting about himself. Hikaru was just switching from trying to follow the conversation to ignoring him when he caught "Touya Akira."

"No way," he said, not even aware if he was speaking in English or Japanese as his mind balked at what it heard. He collected himself

long enough to be sure he was understood before demanding, 'You say *you* beat Touya Akira? At Go?'

The bigger guy looked him up and down and smirked, not even glancing at the mini board displaying Hikaru's game (that he was *teaching*) in progress. 'Yes.'

Hikaru looked him up and down and folded his arms, glad he hadn't slipped off his stool when the guy came in so he had that little bit of extra height to come closer to matching up. As flatly as he knew how in Japanese he retorted, 'Liar.'

The guy looked at him again and scoffed, then stopped looking as though Hikaru wasn't even worth his attention. Hikaru worked very hard not to bristle. 'And you know how?'

Because Hikaru could beat this braggart with his dominant hand tied behind his back and both eyes closed and Akira could still beat Hikaru and Akira was Hikaru's rival, darn it, not this no-name never-been's who was just talking trash instead of showing the slightest interest in actually playing. It wasn't logical, but Hikaru was *right* .

'He's better than you.'

The bigger guy crossed his arms back, narrowed his eyes, and glared at Hikaru. 'I beat Touya Akira.'

Hikaru glared back. 'Liar.'

Tsutsui tried to break up the stalemate. So did Akari. Hikaru tried challenging the bullhead to a game. The bigger guy scoffed something absolutely nonsensical about Go being inferior to some other game Hikaru didn't recognize the name of and not worth his time, launched another taunt at Tsutsui, and left, banging the door shut behind him.

Tsutsui sighed, sat back down, and tried to urge Akari and Hikaru to resume their game. Hikaru was too busy stewing to notice. Where

did that guy get off badmouthing Go, and claiming to be expert in it all in one breath? Jerkwad. He probably wouldn't last ten hands against Sai, or-

Hikaru abruptly stood up and grabbed his bag. Then he sat down as he remembered school wasn't over yet and he'd probably get in trouble for sneaking out early. 'Is he coming back?' he demanded of Tsutsui, paying less attention to phrasing than usual.

Tsutsui looked hesitant, then resigned. 'Now he knows, probably... yes.'

'Good. When?'

Akari looked apprehensive. 'What will you do, Hikaru?'

Hikaru grinned. He spent the rest of school plotting how to make it work, with a little help from discreetly passed and badly translated notes in romaji with Akari since she was in his class, and as soon as school let out took off straight for the train into the city. When he got to the salon Akira wasn't there, but the receptionist assured him he was coming and let Hikaru hang around while he waited.

Akira looked startled when Hikaru grabbed his arm as soon as he came in the door. "Come with me! You've got a game."

"What?" Akira said blankly.

Hikaru dragged him back toward the train station, explaining on the way, though judging by the other boy's expression "there's this snob older student I want to watch you beat down" apparently didn't explain much.

Tsutsui and Akari put more effort into enlightening him once they got back to the school, while waiting to see if Kaga would show up again. Akira slowly began to look less bewildered, but replaced it with unease.

'And... why do I have to play this person?' he asked carefully once Tsutsui had finally gotten Hikaru to stop complaining about him and apologized for the younger student's actions.

"He claimed he *beat* you," Hikaru scoffed.

Akira blinked several times. 'Who?'

Tsutsui mumbled the braggart guy's name. Akira still looked lost. Hikaru took that as confirmation Kaga obviously *hadn't* beaten Akira and called for a vote to go hunt him down and tie a board in front of him rather than just waiting around for him to come back.

'No.'

'No.'

'Hikaru, I need to go home...'

"But Akirrraaa..."

'Why don't you just play him? I have to go home. My father will be waiting for me.'

Akari told him goodbye and nice meet to you, Tsutsui garbled something that sounded a little starstruck, and Akira escaped looking distinctly embarrassed. Hikaru sulked. Neither of his so-called almost-friends made any effort to console him about the world conspiring to foil his wishes.

In which Hikaru births a conspiracy

Stepping Stones

~ 23 ~ In which Hikaru births a conspiracy

Hikaru opened the front door, mentally rehearsing 'sorry not interested' for politely getting rid of Japanese salespeople, and instead blurted, "Waya!"

He started to add "What the heck are you doing here?" or possibly, "How did you even find my house?" but before he could Waya jabbed a finger at Hikaru's chest and accused, 'You know Jaro!'

Hikaru's heart stopped beating for a second. But he also instantly said, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

It occurred to him right after he started saying it that he probably would have been more convincing if he'd remembered to speak in Japanese-but then again, maybe not, because Waya just jabbed at his chest again with every word while he repeated, 'You. know. Jaro!'

Hikaru assumed an expression of indignation while rapidly cobbling together the words necessary to demand, 'Why you think so?'

Waya gave him a *you stupid little bug, you think you're fooling anyone* look and elucidated, with less jabbing this time, 'You ask how Jaro play more pros. I say schedule games. Now Jaro schedules games! You know Jaro!'

Well that did make it pretty obvious, in retrospect, didn't it.

Crap.

How was he going to explain this?

Hikaru floundered, then sighed and stuffed his shoes on, thinking rapidly while Waya waited, practically vibrating with impatience. His first instinct was to drag Waya to his bedroom to make sure of no interruptions while he tried to fix this mess, but absolutely no way did he want the insei anywhere near there when Sai was waiting for him to get back to demonstrating Missile Command on his laptop. It sucked to have to leave the ghost hanging with no explanation, but in this state he wouldn't trust Waya not to follow him and wonder-naturally-who the heck he was talking to. But-

Hikaru smothered a brief grin at his own brilliance as he finished (unnecessarily) retying his shoelaces and yelled, in Japanese, before shutting the door, 'I'll be back later, Mom!'

Never mind that his mother wasn't home and he always talked to her in English. At least Sai would figure out something had come up; he could explain fully once he'd gotten rid of Waya and come back.

'Well?' Waya demanded, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Eh..." The shed was just as out as his bedroom; Hikaru hoped none of his in-country friends ever got even a clue of its existence. Which left... somewhere else. "Ramen?"

Waya sighed in exasperation, then started the interrogation as they walked. 'How you know Jaro?'

Hikaru glanced around shifty-eyed even though there was no one else nearby. "Ramen," he repeated firmly.

He didn't actually care about not talking in the open; he just needed the extra few minutes to figure out what the heck he was going to say.

Waya glanced at him suspiciously, then their surroundings, and humphed and fell silent. Until two seconds after they'd sat down in the ramen shop, when he repeated, in a lower but no less demanding tone than before, 'How you know Jaro?'

Hikaru took a deep breath, resisted the urge to fiddle with everything in reach, and prepared to lie-without-lying like he'd never lied before. In Japanese, without Isumi or Akira around, which was actually a good thing. If he said something stupid he needed to take back later he could blame it on mistranslation.

But he'd start simple, and wing it from there.

'Jaro is... my teacher.'

Waya sucked in a deep breath and sat up straight, then leaned forward again, eyes gleaming. 'Who is he? How you meet him? Why he only play online? Why he never-'

'Slow down!' Hikaru held up a hand to stem the tide he was fast losing comprehension of. He couldn't let himself get rattled or he'd wind up saying really stupid stuff like Jaro was really a Go-obsessed ghost only he could see. Which of those questions did he least not want to answer? 'I met him... when he taught me Go.'

Great answer, in that it added absolutely nothing to the explanation. He could totally do this.

Except Waya didn't have anywhere near the patience to sit there and let Hikaru keep piecing together barely-useful half-truths.

'When you meet him? Where? Why he teach you?'

'I learned in America,' Hikaru said, totally truthfully. 'S- *Jaro* watched me play, showed me how to play better.' Also totally true, if much simplified and completely unconnected. He shrugged and grinned a little, gaining confidence, while he figured out the best wording for, 'So I kept bugging him, and he made me better.'

Waya let out a little sigh that sounded like disappointment, taking his razor-stare off Hikaru as he sank back in his seat. 'Jaro is American... so he only plays here online.'

Yes . Well... better not to have to invent a person Sai was back in America, and come up with reasons he could never fly over and visit his student, and why he had no record of existence over there either... but what did that leave?

'He might not be in America now,' Hikaru hedged, still thinking.

Waya perked up again. 'Why not? Is he here?'

Oh no. 'I don't know,' Hikaru fibbed. Technically since he didn't see the ghost at the moment it could be anywhere. 'He travels.' From the shed to Hikaru's house and back. And to his gramps'.

Waya looked bewildered. 'Why? Does he visit?'

'I haven't seen him for a while.' He was definitely claiming mistranslation on that if he got pressed for any further details to whichever phrase was the least specific time span, like anywhere from years to minutes. 'Er... he avoids people. In person. Mostly.' Sort of, assuming it was Sai's choice that nobody but Hikaru could see him, which could be possible considering Hikaru had never actually asked. 'People... make him nervous. Make trouble for him.' The modern world did anyway, and people probably hurt his feelings by not noticing his existence, especially the pros who wouldn't play him online.

Waya looked very round-eyed as he absorbed that information for several minutes. Hikaru took advantage of the pause to enjoy his ramen, which was tasty even if it was an excuse. Waya still hadn't touched the bowl in front of him.

'So... Jaro travels... often,' he finally said, repeating Hikaru's explanation, 'to avoid trouble.'

Somehow that didn't sound quite the same as it had two minutes ago.

But Hikaru wasn't one to nitpick, so he shrugged and agreed.

'Travels where?'

'I don't know. He could be anywhere right now.' Hikaru felt proud of himself for keeping a perfectly straight face there. Sai *could* be anywhere outside Hikaru's sight, they weren't talking odds of where he was...

For some reason Waya looked even more excited than before. 'And he hides who he is.'

Uh... 'He's very private.'

'But he still teaches you, and plays on NetGo.'

"Yeah," Hikaru decided, calculating the chronology and figuring a little more less-modified truth couldn't hurt. 'I wanted to show you his games some, and he likes it.'

That made Waya look satisfied. 'He plays on NetGo often, not in person?'

'NetGo more than anything else,' Hikaru agreed. He still wasn't totally relaxed, but this was way easier than he'd thought it'd be; Waya was pretty much feeding him the story now. Taking a chance, he added, totally truthful and with appropriate solemnity, 'Only pros Jaro can play are on NetGo.'

Waya promptly sat up straight, eyes gleaming so much Hikaru almost wondered what he was seeing and how much danger it posed to the rest of humanity. 'Jaro *should* play pros. Even only on NetGo. I'll help.'

Hikaru grinned. Widely. How lucky he'd already learned the phrase for Sai; it definitely applied here now too. 'You're awesome. Thanks.'

Waya grinned back, finally dug into his ramen, and they fell to plotting. Hikaru could hardly wait to get home afterward and tell Sai

how much progress they were about to make thanks to the help of their new co-conspirator.

After he apologized for leaving the ghost alone with almost no warning like that, of course, but at least that shouldn't happen very often...

Hmm. He ought to find a way to make sure that didn't happen very often, preferably other than telling his friends 'yeah, uh, don't ever come to my house okay?' What if Sai got sick of it someday and suddenly unleashed poltergeist powers on his hapless room? His mom would make Hikaru clean it all up, and maybe even ground him for it, it wouldn't matter that it wasn't actually him who made the mess.

Hmmm...

"Hey Mom, I realized that whole leaving the TV on thing really was horribly inconsiderate and immature of me," he informed her later that evening once they'd both gotten home. "And I think I've figured out why I did it. It's a subconscious yearning for personally meaningful technology that my laptop just isn't fulfilling anymore."

"Really," his mother said, not trying very hard to keep a straight face. "Am I to take that to mean you need a new laptop?"

"Of course not." Hikaru looked shocked. Nice thought she'd come up with though, maybe she'd be more inclined to say yes since this was cheaper. "Old uh... Betsy and I are inseparable. We'll be together until her cord frays and hard drive plunges into the blue screen of death. I need a cell phone."

"You do." That was not a yes. She was looking even more amused.

"Just a cheap one," Hikaru bargained, willing to throw all the really cool features out of the negotiation at the onset as a gesture of good

faith. "With texting. And possibly pictures. But mostly the calling and texting."

His mother still didn't look like she was about to say yes, so he quickly brought out even more bargaining capital. "It can be a *Japanese* cell phone. I'll practice romaji on it-maybe even kanji and kana stuff-and it'll always be practicing with someone else, so they can correct me, so I'll be *constantly learning* ." He gave her a winning smile.

"So a cell phone will help you with your Japanese practice," she repeated, still looking amused.

Darn it, this was supposed to be easier than this. Hikaru shuffled one foot a little, looked up at her earnestly, and let his lower lip, just barely, poke out. "You know you were so concerned about me not fitting in here all this time, and not connecting with kids my age and all, and... well... I *have* met some now, Mom, schoolmates even, that might be kinda fun to hang out with-"

Which he actually already did sitting around playing Go during breaks, which was just fine, but there was Waya too, and Isumi, never mind they had his home number and email-and Akira even.

"-And they all have cell phones-" oh, crap, don't lead it into 'and if they all jumped off a cliff would you' "-so it's just so much easier for them, I mean if I wanted to meet them someplace and got lost I could just call and have them set me straight instead of asking a random stranger-you know how dangerous it can be talking to strangers in a big city, especially when I barely speak the language so no one might understand if I yell help I'm being kidnapped..."

Hikaru gave up. His mother was laughing so hard she couldn't possibly be paying attention anymore.

"All that," she finally chuckled, "from leaving the TV on."

"Yearning for technology," Hikaru reminded her. "I've been fighting an overpowering urge to turn the microwave on and off all afternoon."

His mother started laughing again. Hikaru figured that was probably the best note he was going to get to leave her to think about it on. Especially when she promised, "I'll talk with your father about it."

"Thanks Mom!" One more little chip to the pile couldn't hurt-he threw his arms around her in a quick hug before dashing off to his room to see what Sai had gotten up to in his absence. Probably wouldn't hurt to hang out with the ghost at least until dinner before moving back to the shed after leaving him alone like that.

Raising her voice enough to be heard, she mused, "When did I raise such a manipulative little monster?"

"Love you too Mom!" he yelled back, grinning.

In which Sat meets an old friend

A/N: Anybody see this coming? :)

Stepping Stones

~ 24 ~ In which Sai meets an old friend

'What's in your bag?'

Hikaru glanced at where he'd just slung it down beside the goban, startled, before returning his gaze to his grandfather's. "Uh..." Right, there was no school today, he wouldn't have brought it except...

Well, there really didn't seem to be much way around it, since there wasn't anything else in his backpack. So he shrugged and pulled it open to lift out one of the pots of stones. 'Brought these.'

His grandfather made a noise of interest-or at least Hikaru was pretty sure that frown looked interested-so he passed it over, with both hands, and his gramps took it equally carefully in his weathered palms. Hikaru thought fast for a reason to have brought extra completely unnecessary stones for a game (that had nothing to do with the spectator ghost sitting between them) while his grandfather removed the lid and dipped a hand inside, stirring the stones around. He made another sound, softer than before.

'These stones-I learned to play with these,' he said, holding one chipped one up to the light. 'It was very good board to learn from.'

Hikaru's jaw dropped.

'You-I-you know-' He tried very, very hard not to look at Sai even in his peripheral vision. 'I found it,' he finally stammered, paying extra attention to the Japanese phrasing to help keep his concentration off the ticket to the loony bin. 'It-is good for learning, yes.'

Then he held his breath, because really? Had he?

His grandfather picked out another stone, still practically cradling it like an old friend. 'Tried to teach your father once, but he had no time, no patience. So I left it behind... I had forgotten. Is good you found it.'

'Yes, but... when you played, what was it like?' Hikaru demanded, slightly clumsily from impatience, because really, after a hint like that? Had he?

'I found the board very young.' His grandfather looked up at him, or actually past him, and smiled. 'Met a good teacher. Then I left for school, and had no room to take it... and when I returned...'

Oh. Hikaru felt his posture relax, more sure, though he felt a stab of inexplicable disappointment. 'You didn't see him anymore?' he guessed. Sai was sitting right there, after all, ramrod straight and scrutinizing his gramps.

His grandfather shook his head, then looked at him piercingly. 'You met him? The teacher of the board?'

Hikaru did *not* glance at the side where Sai was sitting. But he grinned. 'Sai's great.'

" *Heihachi*," the ghost suddenly breathed, starting to look a little teary.

Hikaru couldn't help starting and glancing over for just a second. Wasn't that his gramps' name? 'Want to play him?' he offered impulsively, asking both of them. 'I can place stones.'

At that Sai looked even tearier and his gramps started, then looked down at the pot he was still holding, then suddenly laughed and murmured something like, 'Of course. Forgive me,' which Hikaru didn't hear very clearly. Then he said decisively, 'Yes,' and set the pot down on his side of the board.

Hikaru got the other out of his backpack to set beside himself and tilted his head to indicate Sai scoot closer to him. Then, before they even got to nigiri, his grandfather suddenly demanded, 'You play Sai? Often?'

'Uh... yes?' Hikaru said, confused.

His grandfather made a noise of disgust at him. 'Then why you come here to learn from me? You have good teacher, don't go to a worse one!'

Hikaru opened his mouth to protest, then closed it while he thought about that-it was true, Sai was way better than Gramps, so... why was he here?

Somehow he suspected saying 'Because sometimes I actually beat you' wouldn't go over well with either of the other parties at the goban.

"Um..." What were the words, what were the words... 'Respect for my elder.' He tried an I'm-your-adorable-grandkid-now-melt smile.

His grandfather was evidently not of the breed of parents that melted at adorable kids. He humphed. 'I will play Sai. *You* will play Sai-' Then, ridiculously unfairly, he evidently followed that train of thought further and arrived at the conclusion, 'You play Sai often, yet improve so slow? Why?'

'Hey, he hard to understand!' Hikaru protested indignantly. 'And I have school-'

But his grandfather interrupted him. 'You talk like *this* to *Sai* ?'

'I talk-' Hikaru tried to defend himself, but his grandfather wasn't having it. They got into 'He waste time on you and you show no respect-' ' *I* entertain *him*, he-' 'Brat, honored elders-' "Stick-in-the-mud!" "*Hikaru*-" during which Hikaru started regularly falling into English out of his frustration in the difficulty of expressing what he

wanted. Which, of course, just made his gramps start grinding on him even harder.

The game that hadn't even started derailed into a speech lesson, and not just a regular Japanese lesson but an *ancient, formal, strict* Japanese lesson that he couldn't help thinking would be pretty much the same as walking around spouting forsooth thou verily mayhap in Ye Olde English. And Sai was no help convincing his gramps otherwise, because as soon as the ghost realized what was going on it jumped in, looking thrilled to bits, and in this case was just as merciless a taskmaster as on the Go board-and as his grandfather.

'Gramma, Gramp's picking on me!' Hikaru finally wailed in an attempt to escape.

His gramps' smirk was positively malicious as he informed the trapped teenager that his grandmother was at the market. Then Sai started back in, eager and irrepressible and channeling a soulless drill sergeant. Then his gramps started back in. Hikaru resigned himself to memorizing all their instruction at least long enough to repeat on demand just so he wouldn't still be stuck there when the beard he hadn't even grown turned gray.

Of course, the distraction of plotting revenge on them both made the whole thing last even longer.

'Good afternoon. Please pardon my intrusion.'

Akira started to turn around, wondering why the accent sounded odd and who would speak so formally-and felt his jaw drop.

" *Hikaru* ?"

"Hey Akira," the blond-banged ex-American returned cheerfully while dropping into the chair beside him, in the same loose randomly-inflected English he always spoke in, and pulled out a cell phone. "Can you help me figure out how this thing is set up? I didn't figure

on the user manual being in Japanese, I let Akari fiddle with it earlier and now I think my ringtone is from Sailor Moon or something, I can't even find the menu-

For a surreal second Akira wondered if he had imagined the first greeting. It was the weirdest, most absurd thing for Hikaru to possibly come up with-but Hikaru was weird and absurd, so he slowly shook himself out of the shock enough to focus.

"Do you have the manual? I have not used this phone..."

"Mmm... lemme see."

Hikaru dug through his backpack while Akira played with the phone's interface, figuring out how the menu was set up and subdivided. Akari-was that name familiar?-was the second name in the contacts besides Home, and appeared to have a customized ringtone set to play whenever the phone received an incoming call from her. Out of curiosity, since Hikaru had already implicitly given him permission to play around with the phone, Akira found the option to test the selection.

Hikaru groaned. "Agghh, that sounds so *girly* . Can't it just beep or something marginally less annoying?"

Akira thumbed through the list of options available, some of which proved to be generic rings or beeps and some of which proved to be clips from what he assumed were popular songs. He didn't listen to music much.

"Awk, that's even worse-hey, that sounds kinda cool." Hikaru emerged from his backpack and took the phone back without ceremony to examine the screen, without any evident comprehension. "So, you figured out how it works? How about texting? Also calling, actually-is this button send? And this one end?"

"Well..."

They played with the phone for a while, including with help from the manual eventually, Akira all the while secretly wondering if this was going to turn out to have anything to do with Go and why he was spending so much time basically doing nothing instead of something productive. Customers paid to play him, after all, and he needed to study.

But Hikaru was pretty helpless poking around until he memorized exactly which sequences produced which results, and it was a chance to practice his English. And for some reason-probably mostly his lack of experience being rude-it was hard to say no or interrupt when Hikaru got going, waving his hands around and saying things that didn't make sense and flopping all around on his chair like it was a personal possession in his own room.

He wondered briefly if this was what having friends was like, mingled enjoyment and discomfort in their company, flashes of acute embarrassment of association, and a niggling irritable suspicion he was being used just for convenience. It was so much simpler with Go.

"Now I'll just have to decide who to keep it a deep dark secret from that I have this thing so they don't get the number and bug me," Hikaru finally declared with a satisfied expression. "And maybe practice accidentally deleting people; if Akari manages to change the ringtone again I am not going to listen to that all day... dunno why she'd call me though. How do you delete a number?"

Akira figured it out and showed him, Hikaru repeated it until he'd committed it to memory. Then he cheered himself, "Success! I am the master of all things cellular technological!"

Akira shook his head in bemusement and without even really thinking about it said, "You speak very, very strange, Hikaru."

Hikaru grinned and without warning dropped into weirdly old-fashioned formal Japanese again. 'You have my thanks and much gratitude, my friend.'

Akira blinked, blindsided again, but Hikaru just kept grinning. So Akira relaxed enough again to tell him, "I cannot think anything stranger you could say."

"Oh yeah?"

He didn't seem offended, so Akira gestured vaguely at him and elaborated, "You look like-" He wasn't even going to try to find the words. Especially in English. "And speak like-my father. Or grandfather. Is very unexpected."

"Huh." Hikaru looked thoughtful-an expression that, for some reason, stirred trepidation in Akira over whatever he was thinking about. "S'my gramps' fault, he's evil. I think old people lose their souls by his age, nothing else explains it. Thanks for the help. Wanna go grab something at the nearest McDonald's? My treat."

From teaching Go for yen (for his father's salon) to teaching cell phone use for hamburgers, Akira mused, when he didn't even have a cell phone. And he liked Go. And this was wasting even more of his afternoon, for no purpose, when he could finally start playing...

Akira sighed, said, "Okay," and reached for his jacket.

They didn't play any Go, even when Hikaru started scribbling on the paper placemat with the crayons provided to entertain young children. They did get into an argument over whether the fill-in-the-line people would realistically have ridiculously colored hair, which escalated even more ridiculously by bringing in examples like the clown pictured in the kids' meal toys display and other obviously not real figures, mostly from anime of all things, which when Akira reflected later he almost couldn't believe he'd taken part in.

But before he got to retrospection there was a span of Hikaru pelting him with crayons and laughing, and him calling Hikaru several kinds of stupid idiot in both languages, and Hikaru laughing even harder that Akira was going to get them kicked out while Akira threatened to

complain to the manager about the company that was preventing his enjoyment of his meal...

And then, somehow, it was so late he had to go straight home to dinner, on a full stomach, without any of his homework finished or a single Go game studied to review with his father, and nothing done instead except-well- *nothing* . And both his parents concerned whether he was alright because Akira never did that. And he didn't have a clue how to begin explaining what happened, because he wasn't sure he understood himself.

Except that it was definitely Hikaru's fault.

In which Hikaru unleashed a monster

A/N: Sorry it's short, next update Wednesday will be longer.

Stepping Stones

~ **25** ~ In which Hikaru unleashed a monster

"Alright..." Hikaru cracked his knuckles as he logged into NetGo, on his account rather than Sai's since he didn't want to be flooded with game requests from baby players, and headed for the forums. Waya had happily taken over making sure no one would suspect a random half-Japanese schoolkid of having anything to do with the mysterious ranking God of NetGo (and seriously, people were really calling him that now?). Time to see what he'd come up with.

Hikaru grinned at the top threads all focused on Jaro's identity and marked with the little icon indicating "hot" topics. He clicked on the top one and started reading.

After a moment he stopped reading. Instead he went into the browser toolbar and fiddled the translation software on and off several times, just on the off chance it would change the meaning of the words on his screen. It didn't.

Hikaru sat back in his computer chair and regarded the screen for another moment. "Well... huh."

Then he started reading again, stopped, and instead unplugged his laptop and carried it down to the shed where Sai immediately greeted him. Hikaru grunted in return, focused on settling and orienting the laptop comfortably for both of them, and gestured for the ghost to read over his shoulder.

Sai's expression cycled from surprise to disbelief as Hikaru switched the translator back and forth for their turns reading.

' *This is me?*' he queried after surely only a few lines.

'Yes. You're Jaro,' Hikaru agreed. Really it was long past the time the ghost should have gotten that, but he suspected it was just shock. He still couldn't decide whether to smile or just stare himself as he read each new person's spinoff of the last rumor. He tilted his head at the screen as he switched it back to English. "What do you think, you're more a globe-trotting Robin Hood or a Carmen Sandiego no one knows exactly what is stealing?"

Sai gave him his puppy dog-drill sergeant look at the question in English (and how he could possibly combine those expressions, much less so effectively, was an even bigger mystery than where Waya had come up with such wild ideas). Hikaru suddenly remembered why he hadn't been down with the ghost in the first place as he sighed and grudgingly tried to rephrase himself in formal Japanese, then gave it up because it just wasn't worth the effort of trying to explain Robin Hood and Carmen Sandiego, then tried not to lose his patience searching for polite words for 'Forget it' instead.

It almost wasn't worth hanging out with the ghost anymore now that it'd gotten so insistent, except he still had great games with it and now his gramps wouldn't play him at all. And it was still fun substitute-teaching the neighborhood kids. And he still hadn't had the pleasure of watching Sai face off against an online player way better than Hikaru and send the opponent home crying about his pro ranking or whatever. (He was going to fix that, somehow, some way, soon, especially now that he had Waya's help.)

But since he was here, and had opened his mouth, he was stuck in the feudal era with every other word he tried getting corrected until he found an escape route.

... Or a distraction.

How fortunate he'd brought with him a laptop full of Go and Jaro rumors.

Hikaru pretended to pay attention to the ghost's lecture while he discreetly skimmed the thread onscreen until he found a really crazy theory, then pretended to have just noticed it and laughed out loud. Sai promptly forgot the lecture in an eager demand to read for himself, and Hikaru was home free.

Except for whenever he said anything, which pretty quickly focused him on meaningful monosyllables and two-word sentences, but that was still okay.

After all, it wasn't every day he got vocabulary lessons from an anonymous smuggler in a self-designed airship, invisible to all radar, who was permanently on the run from several evil governments that wanted him in prison and several good ones that wanted him to file patents, teach their comparatively stupid genius students and devote his clever inventions to their benefit rather than humanity's... plus something about a circus. And possibly, according to the translator, an extremely grainy linked picture and some second-guessing on Wikipedia, a steam-powered bicycle. Except Hikaru wasn't sure what bicycles could possibly have to do with anything.

He was distracted from contemplation of what state the world would be in if real evolution occurred at the same rate as rumors did by a short set of knocks on the shed door heralding the arrival of the neighborhood kids to play Go. Hikaru closed the laptop, got up to let them in and then paused at the door after he opened it, noting an oddity. The kid in front was the squirrely little second-loudest squirt, not the usual miniboss.

'Where's Shun?' he asked as the kids filed past to form their usual gaggle around the goban, one of them unknowingly in the exact spot Sai had just vacated. Even though the ghost was incorporeal it didn't much seem to like being sat on-or in.

Several of the kids shrugged. Squirrel bothered to put the explanation into words for him. 'Bored. Said he can beat us all now, so why bother.'

Hikaru snorted. "Brat." Had he beaten all the rest of the kids already? Yep, last time he'd gotten Four Eyes by about three points; but the time before that Four Eyes beat him, and he certainly wasn't anywhere close to having learned all he could from Sai. If that evidently wasn't enough of a draw to keep his interest, though...

Hmm...

'Tell him if he not come again, he might miss new opponents,' Hikaru told them, and was gratified to see all the kids sit up and take notice at that. He gave them a few seconds to clamor all their variations of 'Who?' and then held up his hand to silence them with a mysterious smile.

'Not yet. Tell you more later.'

Whines, groans of disappointment, begging, and if he heard correctly one offered bribe of a filched cookie. The squirts were getting more sophisticated. Probably all the Go's influence.

Sai didn't appear to approve of the bribe, or maybe just not of their noise, since he whisked his fan at Hikaru from the corner and jabbed it toward the board. Hikaru obligingly took his usual place at one side of the goban, the ghost settling in the space directly behind him, and concentrated on parroting.

'Now, Kozue, Riku, you two start today. Put down four stones each...'

The kids' lesson ended when Hikaru's mom called him in to eat, then chained him to his homework in the dungeon of his room rather than let him go back out, but finally Hikaru was free just long enough to get back to the shed and plot with Sai before he had to turn in for the night. The ghost wanted an explanation of his idea for new opponents for the kids, even though there were a lot of details Hikaru would have to work out to make anything happen.

Sai was so interested he even forgot to concentrate more on Hikaru's diction than his meaning, and begged more insistently than the squirts to see the potential opponents Hikaru had thought of. So the next weekend Hikaru loaded his backpack with Sai's pots of stones and hopped on the train to the Go Institute.

Hikaru hadn't really put much stock in the ghost's solemn vow to behave in a civilized undistracting manner in public, but as soon as they found the room with all the insei playing Sai's fan went up in front of his face and he went as silent and still as a paused video, just staring in. After a few minutes Hikaru wandered a few steps away from the door, took out his cell phone and pretended to be absorbed in it, so no one visible looked conspicuous. Since he didn't actually know how to play any of the games on his phone, though, it was a very tedious few minutes until Sai rejoined him.

Hikaru stuffed the phone into his pocket and wondered why the ghost looked a little teary-eyed while he glanced around to make sure no one else was nearby. 'So, good idea?' he murmured, partially testing whether the ghost was still too distracted to criticize his speech.

Sai's fan snapped closed. 'Yes.'

Hikaru grinned.

In which Hikaru administers a tournament

A/N: A bit of outside speculation on Jaro today.

Stepping Stones

~ **26** ~ In which Hikaru administers a tournament

Hikaru wasn't much of a planner and still didn't know that much about navigating everyday Japanese life, so actually setting the kids up to play each other took some help. First he called Waya to ask if there were any Go boards in parks anywhere that anyone could play on, like he remembered seeing chess tables once or twice in America. Then he asked Akari if she'd like to help babysit a whole bunch of kids some afternoon and maybe hand out cookies for prizes or something.

Talking in Japanese over the phone, he discovered, was not much fun and not as easy as doing so in person. They kept starting to talk at the same time without visual cues so he missed what they were saying and he forgot words a lot more often, but he still couldn't argue the convenience of resolving a new idea with a few sentences whenever rather than having to meet up face to face every time.

Waya answered no, he'd never heard of such a thing, and suggested Go salons. Hikaru imagined asking to use an entire salon for a day and grimaced at the probable cost. He asked Waya if the insei had their own boards they could maybe bring to a park for a day or something.

Akari said sure, and then asked how many kids, who would be dropping them off and picking them up, whether they'd need to be fed, and if he'd planned how to referee any problems in the games that came up.

Hikaru briefly considered throwing the whole plan down the toilet along with his cell phone and eating all the cookies Akari promised to bring himself. Sai consoled him with sympathy, understanding and liberal encouragement of all the effort he was going to coupled with silent puppy dog eyes that constantly reminded him *what a wonderful idea, so many children learning Go, they must always be encouraged to flourish...*

Hikaru gritted his teeth, sighed, and kept to it.

Waya agreed that the insei probably had their own boards but pointed out that they were barred from all amateur tournaments, since they were supposed to be at a higher level given that they were studying to become pros. He also, if Hikaru understood correctly, predicted that half of them would faint if exposed to the sun for more than a few minutes at a time.

Hikaru countered that this wasn't a real tournament, just an informal thing to maybe give two bunches of kids some new rivals, and predicted his squirts could darn well match up to them better than regular amateurs since they were learning from Jaro. But he'd really kind of only been thinking about the younger insei anyway, since there were only so many kids in the neighborhood gang.

Waya did an instant about-face in enthusiasm for the idea at the mention of Jaro but warned Hikaru that the overseers at the Go institute were not likely to be particularly impressed if he just kidnapped some of the insei for a day to go play somewhere else.

Hikaru argued that playing in the Institute would give the insei a home field advantage.

Waya informed him that were they in person he would smack Hikaru upside the head because that was not the point.

Hikaru admitted to Akari that he hadn't really thought about any of the logistics involved, and wasn't sure after all where the unofficial tournament might happen, much less when or for how long.

She asked him when the kids wanted to do it, with the suggestion that they could handle getting their parents to agree to ferry them, and after Hikaru reported the general level of enthusiasm among his gang asked what about the insei and their parents. Or, possibly, them and their sensei at the Institute.

Sai's consolation and mute puppy dog eyes begging Hikaru to keep trying started to have less effect compared to the lure of just bashing his head against a wall until all the problems went away. Did every simple meetup for kids that age require so much planning in advance? It was *too much work*, on top of his own Go practice and his never-ending homework and tutoring which Danielle kept warning him to pay more attention to. And Sai could darn well *stop staring like that*, would he rather skip his online Go that also required hours of Hikaru's time?

That killed Sai's puppy dog eyes for a while, because of course he wouldn't give that up. But then he offered to help Hikaru with his homework instead so that would take less time.

It turned out the ghost was a gold mine for ancient history. Hikaru happily copied down everything the ghost rattled off in response to his study questions, then rewrote it into his own words instead of formal archaic, then rewrote it again to correct everything he'd copied wrong, then handed it in to his teacher. His teacher gave him the highest score he'd ever gotten since transferring from the American school.

Sai moved up to Hikaru's room most nights his tutor wasn't there, so Hikaru could flip pages for the ghost to read and later summarize for him while Hikaru studied something else, thus approximately halving his workload. Danielle told him if he kept up his new remarkable progress he might not need her much longer.

And afternoons were suddenly, beautifully free for Go. And all the problems currently involved.

"Hey Akira," Hikaru greeted absently, eyeing the salon the other boy always came to. It'd been expensive enough just paying to come in himself every now and then; with a whole gaggle of brats in tow...

"You know if there's ever, like, charity games played here?"

"Charity games?" Akira repeated with a slight frown as he turned toward him. "What kind?"

Hikaru flopped into the chair opposite him, still speculating. "Bunch of kids." They'd probably have turned the place upside down by the time they were done, even if none of them ever left their seats. He could deal with that somehow after, though, if he could just get them in. "They like playing Go, but they're getting bored just playing each other, so I'm trying to get them some new opponents. And it's practically impossible."

Akira blinked. "Why not take them to tournament?"

Hikaru snorted. "Are you kidding? They blow all their allowances on candy in a day; they couldn't afford it, and I definitely can't pay for 'em. And some of their parents won't either, so if I only took some of them the rest would get mad and they'd probably even stop playing each other. It's a mess."

"So... you want them to play customers here?" Akira asked slowly.

"Huh? No, not these geezers. See, I thought of some other kids they could play, but it's still a headache, cause Waya said the insei's teacher probably wouldn't go for it, even though I say who cares, it has nothing to do with him if some kids decide to play with each other, but I can't find a place they could play that I could afford. You think maybe I could convince a salon to let them all play free somehow?"

He looked at the Japanese boy hopefully. Sai's gang certainly wasn't so bad off that they actually needed a "charity" game, but he'd bring them all in rags and dirt if that would work. He doubted any of them would object too much.

Akira's brow furrowed further. "You want insei to play... more children? Who?"

"Jaro's Disciples," Hikaru said impressively. It worked so well with Waya, he figured giving the kids a name might get them more respect.

"Who?" Akira repeated.

Hikaru deflated. "You don't know Jaro? The God of NetGo? I thought everybody had heard of him!"

Akira shrugged a little. "I do not play NetGo. So, you want insei to play children, who... have good teacher? You think that can equal insei training?"

"Jaro's my teacher too, so yes," Hikaru snapped, annoyed beyond his usual caution. Since he'd established the story with Waya, though, why not use it. "These kids are quick learners, they're already bored with each other, and those insei never do anything but sit and play each other too so why wouldn't they all have fun? That no insei in tournaments thing is stupid anyway. But I can't get Waya to convince their teacher to let them have a field trip or talk to just the insei without telling them a place to go and I can't get my squirts to convince their parents to let them all go off 'somewhere in the city' either, so right now I'm just trying anything I can think of. And I thought of here. You're here more than me; you think there's any chance of it happening?"

Akira leaned back in his chair for a moment with a pensive look, so Hikaru waited and kept himself from fidgeting and interrupting the other boy's thoughts.

"I can ask my father," he finally said slowly.

Hikaru frowned blankly at him. "Your dad? What's he got to do with it?"

"This is his salon," Akira told him, with a puzzled shrug. "You not know?"

"No, why would I? You think he'll say yes?"

"I can ask," Akira repeated, a little dubiously. "What exactly do you want to do? Have teams, or all children play each other?"

"Basically just a round robin," Hikaru agreed, glad he'd already worked out most of such details with Akari.

"A what?" Akira asked.

"Round-oh." He repeated it, enunciating the English, then explained, "Assuming we get the same number of insei as my gang, the one side plays the other, and each kid switches over and plays the next on the other team every game until they've all played each other."

Akira made a sound of enlightenment. "Round robin," he pronounced carefully.

"Right. What's it in Japanese?"

Akira told him, and Hikaru repeated it until Akira nodded, which he took to mean he hadn't butchered it. Then he resumed, "Akari's going to bring cookies for all of them at the end rather than giving out prizes, then they all go home. And maybe do it again sometime if they have fun."

He wasn't entirely sure he wanted to go through all this every time the kids wanted to play, but the original idea was to give them more options of people to play with.

"So, not teaching games? What about time limits? Referee?" Akira asked.

Hikaru frowned at that. Time limited turns, that was a good point; it was standard on NetGo and he remembered it from that one

tournament he'd been in, but Sai's kids hadn't ever played with that. Did the insei?

"Not too strict a time limit," he decided. "We're only talking five or six kids each side, we can fit that into one day. And Isumi's going to referee if he's free since he's a neutral party none of the kids can ambush later if they think he wasn't fair."

"What if he isn't free?" Akira asked.

"Waya will make sure he is, otherwise he's refereeing instead," Hikaru said cheerfully. "Although I might have to get him to help too if the kids aren't feeling like getting along... well, I've also got Akari. Not that she knows much about Go yet. And maybe Tsutsui..." Hikaru paused, then glanced up with an ingratiating smile. "Say, buddy... pal..."

Akira started to look a little unnerved. "Ano... how old are these children?"

"Totally, easily manageable age," Hikaru promised. "Really, how much trouble could they get into with so many of us older responsible types around?"

That evidently wasn't the most convincing tack to take, so he quickly switched gears to bargaining. "Or, if you're too busy to help, just making sure we can use the salon is enough."

"I don't... you..." Akira looked harassed, then settled into looking determined. "I will ask my father," he repeated stoically. "Do you have permission for insei to play?"

"Waya's working on that." With a lot of complaining about all the work involved, only silenced by the promise of getting to play Jaro on NetGo, but really Waya was the best choice. He was an insei, so he already knew the kids, at least in passing, and he spoke way better Japanese than Hikaru. "It'll be easier to get that permission if we already have it here, right?"

"I cannot promise," Akira cautioned.

"No, yeah, that's fine, just ask; that's more than I was hoping," Hikaru assured him. "Is your dad a cool guy? You think he'll say yes?"

"He is..." Akira looked baffled for a second. "... I don't know. Is a strange request, Hikaru. But... maybe?" He shrugged.

"Good enough," Hikaru decided. "Let me know, okay?"

"Okay." Akira nodded. "Come back next week, and I should know."

"You got it," Hikaru agreed happily.

Akira spent a normal evening after school in his room, studying and doing homework before dinner. Once he finished his last assignment he put his books away and started to turn to his goban in the corner, then paused instead and looked to his desk.

Akira's grandparents, very up-to-date with technology and proud of it, had gotten him a personal computer last Christmas. He mostly only used it to compose e-mail letters to them every few weeks in reply to their own, but it had an Internet connection, and he knew well enough how to navigate...

Just out of curiosity, he logged on and found the site Hikaru had mentioned, NetGo. What was his teacher's name, something strange... "the God of NetGo." Akira clicked around, looking for rankings of the top online players-ah-ha. Jaro. Would the site have kifu of past games...?

Akira found them, and studied several, unconscious of the passage of time while he followed one move to another to conclusion, one tactic against one opponent to the next. No wonder Hikaru played so well; his teacher could surpass some professionals! But then why had Hikaru been so shocked to learn of the professional Go world?

Akira filtered through the kifu more carefully, looking for games against higher-ranked opponents, and studied several of what appeared to be the best. Jaro must be a pro; he played too well to be anything else. One couldn't reach that level of skill and experience without devoting hours to the study and play of Go every day, year after year. He wouldn't have such time for it if it wasn't his job.

Who was Jaro? Akira didn't pay much attention to the internet, but he was familiar with several of Japan's pros from his father's study group, and he'd never heard any mention of someone who played this many games online. Was it something so commonly known about the person that it just wasn't worth the mention? But why would a pro play so much online instead of in person; shouldn't he be busy with real games, teaching and tournaments? And why only start playing online less than a year ago-

-Like maybe around when Hikaru moved to Japan. Of course. Hikaru had learned Go in America; Jaro must be a member of the American Go world, and probably only joined this Japanese site to keep playing with Hikaru once he'd moved. No wonder Akira had never heard of him before.

But still, hadn't this person ever told Hikaru anything about professional Go? Why not?

Akira finally shook his head to himself and got up to go to dinner. Maybe he could ask Hikaru more next time they saw each other-next weekend. Right, time to ask Father if he would consider opening the salon for a day to a crowd of insei and... who else, really? Some other children that Hikaru sounded like he knew, that played this American pro online and called themselves his disciples? And let them all play for free?

Suddenly Akira wished he'd asked Hikaru a lot more questions about this plan, so it might make some kind of remote sense when he tried to explain it to his father. It had seemed to hold together when Hikaru told him, but now that he tried to rehash it in his head...

But he'd promised, and it wasn't like he personally had to do anything more than report back yes or no. Well, and have to justify the no to Hikaru when he complained, probably. But at least his father's reasons would be a lot clearer and easier to understand than Hikaru's.

Or they should be, but if Hikaru didn't even see it was a weird request in the first place...

In which Hikaru faces another ghost

Stepping Stones

~ 27 ~ In which Hikaru faces another ghost

Hikaru strolled into the salon the next weekend to meet Akira, and almost choked on a sudden spike of adrenaline: *Oh crap, not another ghost!* Sai was already almost too much all on his own; what did this one want; what was so special about Hikaru that he should be cursed with this new ability to see the dead since moving here-?

Then Akira said, with more poise than Hikaru was used to from him anymore, "Good morning, Hikaru. This is my father, Touya Kouyo."

Then he reversed and repeated the introduction in Japanese, while Hikaru edged toward his usual seat and wished that the other boy was loose enough to use gestures like *yes, I do mean I can see, hear and am referring to this person who seems to be sitting next to me*. Hikaru was so used to only seeing Sai and some historical characters in anime wearing such weird robe-like getups that he wasn't entirely willing to trust his eyes and potentially commit himself to the funny farm by saying the wrong thing. Or speaking to the wrong person.

But the old man *had* to be real, because Akira had just introduced his dad and there was nobody else around he could possibly be referring to... oh, crap, he had to talk to Akira's dad!

"Um... hi," Hikaru said, sliding into his seat, then immediately corrected himself, "Ohayo, um-" honorifics, what was the right honorific, "-Touya-sama?"

Akira's expression just barely showed approval, so Hikaru assumed he'd guessed right.

'Good morning, Hikaru,' the elder Touya returned.

His voice was moderate, and not particularly fast, which Hikaru was quickly grateful for. But he also turned out to speak Japanese way more formally than anybody else Hikaru knew except one, and *crap*, Sai had taken to whapping at his nose with the fan whenever Hikaru tried to respond in kind!

'Akira has told me you wish to have children play here against insei, since their parents will not take them to tournaments.'

'Um... basically, yes,' Hikaru replied as carefully as he could, mentally cringing at his horrible accent, lousy pronunciation and probably dead wrong word choice. He should have paid so much more attention to Sai's lessons, even if they were annoying.

'So you wish to impress their parents to let them become insei?'

'Well, no,' Hikaru said, startled out of self-recrimination into stating the obvious. Where'd he come up with such a crazy idea as that? But how to say... he tried to phrase it in his head quickly and floundered. He didn't have the words, he didn't have a book in his pocket even if he could stand to pull it out and hunt and peck in front of such a person... He leaned over to Akira and muttered in his ear rapidly. Akira frowned faintly, then translated for him.

Hikaru straightened and repeated carefully, 'They want to play more, and nobody else around knows Go. And insei don't play tournaments either, so they all can have fun.'

'Insei do not play in tournaments because they study to play at professional level. Amateurs do not study so much, so they do not have the same skill. The games would be unequal,' Touya Kouyo pointed out.

Dangit, Hikaru didn't think he was misunderstanding any words so badly that the whole meaning could change, but what the heck was the guy nattering about?

'So?' Hikaru scoffed, forgetting to find the politest version. 'If two people want to play Go, why not play Go? If-' He struggled to try to find the right phrasing to express what he wanted, and finally gave up and turned to Akira again. 'If one person never plays because he'd lose, then he'll never get better, and if the other one never has anyone to play against because they'd lose then he'll just get bored, and there goes anybody playing Go at all.'

Akira looked surprised at his impassioned defense, but quickly repeated it, much smoother-sounding than Hikaru would have managed. Touya Kouyo looked at Hikaru thoughtfully for a moment afterward before he asked, 'And these children feel the same?'

Hikaru scratched his head before quickly returning his hand to his lap. He'd parroted for Sai while the ghost taught them how to play; they'd never gotten into philosophical discussions with the brats on who should get to play who and who shouldn't. So... 'They think they can win, and why not? They play each other, they win sometimes, they lose sometimes. If they lose, maybe next time they win.'

'But if they all lose against the insei?' Touya Kouyo asked.

Akira's dad was a pro, wasn't he-geez, was this what being professional was like, the only thing that mattered anymore was winning or losing? Well, obviously the point was to try to win, but still-

Hikaru shrugged. 'They all eat cookies after anyway. And maybe learn harder.'

Which would eat into his free time, but would thrill Sai to bits, and a happy ghost was a lot easier to have hanging around than a bored ghost.

'It's for fun,' he pushed. 'Why not let them try it?'

Touya Kouyo looked at him thoughtfully again. Hikaru resisted the urge to squirm. Akira's dad just... seemed like he paid more attention to ordinary things than most people, like he never quite

turned off looking-at-a-Go-board mode in his head. 'Do you think they might win?'

Against the bunnies Hikaru remembered watching a game between once? 'Yes.' Sai was a good teacher, and the squirts all liked strategically beating each other up enough to have plenty of motivation to have learned well.

'Very well,' Touya Kouyo said after another moment of silence. 'It is an interesting idea. When would you like to bring them?'

Hikaru should have felt relieved, but he was still too busy telling himself he wasn't a bug and there was no microscope. He focused on the question instead.

'Couple weeks?' he asked, giving it thought. That ought to be enough time for Waya to liberate the bunnies from their overseer, and let Hikaru talk up the opposition to the brats while Sai polished them. Give them time to harass their parents into agreeing to let them come, too. Then he hastily rephrased himself more formally. 'Saturday after next?'

'Very well.' Touya Kouyo rose, and surprised Hikaru when he extended his hand just like everybody always did in America, and nobody seemed to in Japan. He reached out to shake it dumbly. 'It was a pleasure to meet you, Hikaru.'

"Er..." Crap, crap, crap, what was 'likewise'... 'Yes,' Hikaru said stupidly.

He and Akira sat and looked at each other for several seconds after the older Touya left, Hikaru's brain already (gratefully) switched back to easy English. "Your dad is..." He trailed off when he couldn't think of any word other than "terrifying."

"He is-" Akira began, looking slightly defensive.

"Yeah," Hikaru agreed. After another second he grinned, letting relief that he'd survived overwhelm the surety that he'd sounded like a moron, and stretched. "So, you gonna come and see if my apparently crazy idea works out or not? Akari's going to bring a ton of cookies, you can probably steal some, and there'll be plenty of squirts around to blame if anyone notices."

"I don't-" Akira began, and then apparently gave up that line of argument. Instead he bit his lip, stared at the empty board between them, and then asked, "Would you like to play a game, Hikaru?"

Hikaru started a little in surprise. "What, now?"

"If all that matters is to have fun, even if you know you may lose..." Akira muttered, still staring at the board, in a very definite tone.

Hikaru opened his mouth to object, but then realized he didn't actually have an exception from his earlier argument to apply here. If they wanted to play Go, why not just play Go...

But he hesitated. This was different than a playdate for a bunch of kids. He didn't just want to play Akira, he wanted to *beat* Akira. But now turning him down would pretty much make him a hypocrite, wouldn't it...

But... well...

Well, it had been a long time now since they'd played; how could he know how close they were if they didn't play again? And if he was badly behind, then how else would he know to work harder?

"Ah heck, okay," he decided, pulling one pot of stones closer, and glanced at the clock. "Can't take too long, though."

Akira grinned as he grabbed his own pot. "Okay. Speed Go."

"But if I win, you can't challenge me again unless you help out with the Mini-Me Tourney," Hikaru made up as they went through nigiri.

"And if you win, I'll only challenge you if you help out with the Mini-Me Tourney."

"That's not fair," Akira protested as he placed his first stone. "But fine. If I win, I will challenge you after your children's Go tournament. And if you win, I will challenge you before your children's Go tournament."

"Wait-that's not what I meant," Hikaru frowned, deciding between a pincer trap or straight ko attack to start. Maybe he should play as if he was rusty, see if he could knock Akira's guard down... "I meant I'll taunt you with one game now, then dangle another as bait to get you to help babysit."

"I don't know children," Akira objected, reasonably, while his territory spread parallel to Hikaru's.

"Me neither, til these squirts came along, but I've figured out they're basically just tinier versions of real people," Hikaru shrugged, firming out his shape as he solidified his plan of attack. "That get way noisier and more hyper, but all you have to do is yell louder to settle 'em down."

Akira gave him a look that suggested incredulity. "In my father's salon?" His stones crept forward to probe for weak spots in Hikaru's line.

"Too late, you agreed," Hikaru said smugly. He captured the first stone that edged too far. Akira let it go to break into his territory on the other side of the board.

"I do not think I agreed."

"Then let's settle it with the match." Hikaru slapped down an aggressively positioned stone that just begged to distract his opponent from Hikaru's real focus.

"Okay."

"But if you win, you have to buy milkshakes at McDonald's."

"What?" Akira broke back through Hikaru's front line and cut off an entire cluster of stones that Hikaru promptly revised his strategy to not need anyway. "Why?"

"Because..." Hikaru started walling off Akira's new foothold. "I had to pay to come in and play you, so it's only fair you have to pay for the privilege of playing me." He grinned.

Akira glared at him, and set down his next stone with more force than usual. "You didn't pay. I heard you tell Ichikawa-san you were only here to talk. Again."

Hikaru scowled as he tried to decide a counter for Akira's new offensive. "She's a very nice lady. Kind and generous. I'll buy her a milkshake when you buy ours."

"I will not buy milkshakes."

"Right. Cuz you're gonna lose."

"I will not!" Akira huffed. "Especially if this is the best you play."

Hikaru stuck out his tongue. "Your envy of my skill is totally transparent."

"This-right there, this is terrible. What are you think-"

"Is not! 'Specially compared to *you* here-"

The receptionist lady kicked them out (nicely) by the middle of their second game. Akira maintained it was because Hikaru hadn't paid. Hikaru insisted it was because Akira had been yelling louder than him over that last series of hands a five-year-old could have seen through.

Akira argued that that was Hikaru's fault too. Hikaru demanded a milkshake to make up for having to put up with such a ridiculous

falsehood.

He got home late for dinner, full of sugar, and behind on his homework, and too pleased with how the day had gone to care.

In which Hikaru makes a mistake

Stepping Stones

~ 28 ~ In which Hikaru makes a mistake

'Okay...' Hikaru set one of Sai's pots of stones down just inside his doorway, then put the other on top of his bed on the other side of the room and visually estimated the distance between them. It wasn't all that much, but should still be more than the ghost could reach away from one pot. 'Try walking here.'

Sai glided forward with such a determined expression he might have been fording a river, then flushed and waved his fan in success when he made it.

"Excellent!" Hikaru grinned. So if he put the pots on two tables yea far apart in the Go salon, that should cover enough space to let Sai watch all the kids playing. Well, he might have to strain his neck a bit to see the boards at the ends of the tables...

But wait. How was Hikaru going to explain random pots of stones sitting there unused? And what if some of the kids *did* take stones, because they didn't know or just for the heck of it; Hikaru didn't want to be responsible for Sai losing bits of himself or coming apart at the seams or something because he got pulled in too many directions when the kids went home. But he'd already promised Sai could come; it was the ghost's kids that were playing, really, so their teacher deserved to be there. And this was possibly the most exciting thing that had ever happened in his un-life the way he'd been acting about it.

Hikaru looked around his room, scowling in thought. How to hide Go stones from casual notice in a Go salon without losing them among other Go stones. There had to be a way.

Maybe if he put them in little bags and gave them to Akari to "decorate" the tables for the event... He gagged a little at the thought. Akari might be nice, but he couldn't trust her not to ever reveal he'd asked such a thing and ruin him for life. There had to be a better way.

His roaming gaze skimmed the box half-tucked under his bed and inspiration hit. His aunt (the most wonderful, thoughtful, awesome person in the world) had sent him a huge stash of American candy for his birthday, including a giant box of bubblegum he'd pretty much ignored since discovering McDonald's. Hikaru grabbed it, stuffed a piece in his mouth, and started chewing as he retrieved both pots of stones and set them outside his door. Sai lurked uncertainly in the doorway.

'Try this.'

Hikaru grabbed a handful of stones, then on second thought dropped back in all but a couple and placed just those a few feet away on the floor of his room. Then he got another couple, and another, and made a trail leading to his bed.

'Can you come?'

Sai looked at the pebbles doubtfully, but stepped forward- gingerly. And stepped forward again. Hikaru whooped when the ghost made it all the way to his side.

"All right! It's a little gross, but this'll work!"

Sai gave him a plaintive look, at which Hikaru sighed and rolled his eyes but dutifully rephrased himself in Japanese. Then he had to explain what he meant. Interestingly, the ghost just seemed to think his idea was incredibly clever, and praised him liberally in expressing it. Hikaru preened while collecting the stones and packing the pots into his backpack, but when they were ready to go he sobered.

'Remember, I can't talk to you outside.' He felt like a jerk for having to say it, but he *had* to pretend Sai didn't exist, for the ghost's own good too. It wouldn't get much Go time if Hikaru was locked up in a padded room.

Sai's face fell, but he nodded.

'You can talk to me,' Hikaru reminded him, trying to console. 'And I can talk for you. Ready?'

Sai nodded firmly. 'Yes. *Let's go!*'

"I'm going into Tokyo for the day, Mom," Hikaru announced as he and his invisible sidekick passed the living room. "Running a Go tournament for a bunch of squirts. It okay if I'm late for dinner?"

"So long as you remember your cell phone, that's fine," his mother agreed. "A tournament, hm? For your little clubhouse minions?"

Hikaru grinned involuntarily, because even though the shed still wasn't and never would be his *clubhouse*, he did kind of like the sound of having minions. Not that he called them that himself.

"Yeah. Just a little one-day thing. And I already got half my homework done." *Thanks to Sai*, he added mentally, since he couldn't out loud.

"You certainly have gotten involved in this game beyond your last hobbies," she commented. "Passing the torch on to the younger generation already?"

" *Mom* ." Hikaru thought for some way to explain it beyond just *Well, yeah* . "Remember when I was little, and told you I'd win a million dollars playing poker on the web?"

"And tried to learn in games with real money nickel-and-dime stakes, which you attempted to filch from the change jar thinking we wouldn't notice? Oh yes, I remember."

Hikaru reconsidered his gambit, because all of a sudden this conversation didn't seem likely to end well. "Never said the whole million would be profit," he defended himself loftily, and went for the door. "Gotta go, bye!"

"Have fun, sweetie. Call if you think you'll be late."

Hikaru closed the front door behind him and ghost and hit the sidewalk at a solid not-quite-jog that helped work off the energy he'd built up the last few days in anticipation. On the bus he organized himself, packs of gum in one jacket pocket, pots of stones in his backpack on the seat beside him, and sat chewing one stick of gum after another at a time until it got juicy, then spitting it back into its wrapper and pressing in a Go stone before carefully rewrapping and tucking it away in his other pocket. Sai hovered beside him and stared out the window at everything that passed so raptly he didn't even seem to notice he was "sitting" in Hikaru's backpack. He was even quiet most of the time, which Hikaru knew better than to expect to last long.

Everything was fine, until Tsutsui called when Hikaru was halfway to the salon to say he couldn't make it. Or, rather, to say that he was going to make it, even though he sounded faint and nasal and coughed every two seconds while trying to assure Hikaru that he was just running a little late because he'd somehow overslept. And then had to clean up his bathroom because he'd thrown up a little. Hikaru didn't have any real choice except to tell him to just go back to bed before he infected all the kids.

But that was a problem, because he'd been counting on Tsutsui to help watch the games and sort out arguments; not only was he way more familiar with Go than Akari but he'd actually said it sounded like fun when Hikaru asked. Darn it. He'd have to convince Akira to help instead, he was sure the other boy would show up just out of curiosity. Maybe bribe him with milkshakes.

Hikaru got to the salon with Sai in good time, refocused and reassured that with that bad luck fate had been appeased and the

rest of the day would go fine, and found Akari already there, chit-chatting with Akira. A few old men were also inside playing each other; Hikaru glanced at them curiously as he exchanged greetings with his friends.

"Salon's open?"

Akira's shoulders hitched in a tiny shrug. "You said only two teams of six, they will not need whole salon. Father said you can move tables into back room for tournament. This way."

The room looked big enough to fit a couple tables together without crowding anybody, which should be all they needed, and there were already folding chairs stacked against one wall. Hikaru nodded in approval and got Akari to get the other end of the closest table outside to drag in, then convinced Akira to help her get the next closest while he adjusted the first table's position a little. That gave him just enough time with them out of the room to slap a few of Sai's stones to the underside of the table, stuck in his gum.

Then he asked Akari about a smaller table for coats and bags and the cookies she'd brought, which of course Akira had to show her where to find, and he gummed the second table quickly before starting to unfold the chairs. Sai whisked around like an oversized buzzing insect, pacing his new expanded limits and beaming at everything from the potted tree in the corner to the poster on the wall.

Waya and Isumi arrived, with Nase, who Hikaru hadn't thought to invite but was glad to see, and helped set up the rest of the chairs. Akira and Akari got back with a small folding table which Waya promptly unloaded several two-liter bottles of soda on.

"Oh, heck no," Hikaru said, just as Akira looked askance at them. "Waya, you give these brats liquefied sugar, you tie them to their seats and keep them there after!"

Isumi translated for everybody else but Akira, with more of a smile than he usually showed at Hikaru's antics, and less tactful editing than Hikaru was sure he'd usually done before. Becoming a pro seemed to have done him good.

'What do we drink then, water?' Waya grumbled.

Nase rolled her eyes and smacked him lightly on the back of the head. 'We wait and go to lunch, just like every other game. Putting food or drink in the Go room!'

Akari glanced uncertainly at the bag no doubt full of cookies she'd just added to the table.

'Then all this is a waste,' Waya complained, putting the sodas back in his grocery bag.

'So just take it home,' Isumi said blandly. 'You drink a bottle a day.'

Waya sniped back, while Akari ventured to question Nase about the cookies. The older girl looked in the bag and settled it that they could pass them out at the very end of the day, after the tournament was over and just as the kids were leaving the salon. Akira hung back by the doorway, not quite watching or participating in any of the conversations, so Hikaru recruited him to help locate and carry in all the gobans the kids would be playing on.

The kids started arriving as the teens finished setting up. Nase chatted with the earliest arrival, a shy insei whose mother apparently was running errands all day and dropped him off as soon as they got into the city, until more kids got there and Akari posted herself at the door to greet and reassure the neighborhood parents who'd barely even heard of the game before. Sai, even though not one of the kids noticed, stood by the doorway in the back room and bowed and thanked each kid for coming to play with a bright smile.

Someone else appeared that gave Hikaru a brief panic attack.

"Uh, Akira, your dad is here," Hikaru hissed, grabbing the other boy's arm. He really meant "Oh god why" or "please tell me he's not staying" but couldn't work out how not to sound pathetic in his two seconds of reaction.

Akira just glanced around-he'd wound up at the front door with Akari, greeting the insei parents who for some reason all seemed impressed to see him-and shrugged a little. "He is curious."

"Wouldn't want to, uh, take him away from anything else or anything," Hikaru mumbled, trying to use his peripheral vision to see the elder Touya without actually looking.

Akira looked briefly puzzled. "Is salon business today, I think."

Hikaru plastered a very fake smile on his face. If he smiled hard enough, maybe it would turn real and all his nerves would go away. "Great."

As the kids started arriving in bunches, Nase chivvied them to the back room with only moderate fuss and got them to dump all their jackets and stuff in one corner and take seats, and even kept them mostly settled. Sai's kids entertained each other as usual, in between sizing up their opponents and offering preliminary verbal sallies. The insei mostly talked with Waya and Isumi, while eyeing (or trying not to eye) their opponents with either baffled or slightly offended expressions.

One of the insei had the sniffles but had come anyway; Hikaru resigned himself that every kid there would probably catch it even though Tsutsui wasn't there and just hoped their parents wouldn't connect it to the tournament. Once the kids stopped coming he did a head count, and discovered a more serious problem.

Squirrel was missing from the neighborhood team. Miniboss informed Hikaru that Squirrel's mom had refused to let him off something even though he'd been begging for two weeks. And that he was probably plotting revenge on all of them for getting to play

when he couldn't, but Hikaru was more concerned about how to let all the kids play when one of them no longer had an opponent. It wasn't fair to make one of the insei sit out after they were already there, or have anyone try to play double games, or put in someone way more experienced-

'What if I play?' Akari offered just as Hikaru was coming to the conclusion that he was totally, completely screwed.

The insei collectively looked dubious. Miniboss's reservations were more stringent. 'You any good?' he asked skeptically, looking her up and down.

'No,' Akari admitted cheerfully. 'But I know the rules. I'll try, and you can help me.'

The neighborhood gang conferred briefly, and agreed to let her take the last seat. One of the insei half-voiced a protest that died as Akari smiled at him. 'Do you play teaching games? I look forward to learning from you.'

'Why not?' Hikaru agreed, mostly because it was the only solution he saw. 'This is just for fun.'

The insei looked a little lost, but none of them argued. Sai looked at Akari with bright-eyed interest and nodded approval from behind their table, which made Hikaru feel justified. Hikaru clapped his hands together. 'Okay! Let's get started.'

Isumi stepped up to the front of the room and explained how to use the timers for the neighborhood gang, then set down the rules for how long each turn could take and to call one of the teens for any disagreements. Each game would last no more than an hour; whoever had the most territory at the end was the winner. Lunch break after the first three rounds, bathroom breaks after every round.

The actual games Hikaru found (thankfully) to be more entertaining and less stressful than he'd begun to expect. The neighborhood

gang played the way they always did in the shed, immediately throwing themselves in, taunting their opponents, and looking at each other's boards and giving unasked-for advice. The insei, as Hikaru had suspected might be the case given the few times he'd seen them, seemed totally thrown and kept looking to the older teens for intervention. The rest of the teens looked dubious also, but Hikaru just cheerfully urged the kids to play. They could stand to loosen up a little, though he did whap Miniboss for a particularly colorful remark, based more on Sai's reaction to it than his own since he was paying more attention to the boards.

The insei took quite a while to adjust to the casual playing atmosphere. Isumi seemed to give up moderating behavior when the whole gang kept giving Akari advice, which she accepted graciously but mostly ignored. Given the time constraints, she seemed to place stones pretty much randomly and was such an obvious wash that her distinctly younger opponent finally unbent enough to start playing a teaching game, instructing her as she lost. By the time they stopped for lunch a couple of the insei were even talking back to their opponents, an achievement that gave Hikaru almost paternal pride. The tournament really was a good idea.

Then came lunch. As the rest of the teens were trying to match up belongings to kids to head to McDonald's Hikaru glanced at Sai and suddenly realized that he couldn't bring the ghost along. The stones were still stuck under the tables, with no time to pry them off and then restick them later. And he couldn't even talk to Sai about it with so many people around.

All he could manage was a hasty glance back as he left the room at the tail end of the group, ushering the stragglers ahead of him. The ghost stood in between the tables watching them with a wistful expression, then straightened at his glance and gave him a bright nod.

Then they tried to corral a mob of little monsters through a meal in public. Keeping them in the booths and accounted for took most of

the older teens. Nase took the teens' orders and yen, went up to the counter and came back with their food. She made it seem easy.

When Hikaru tried to manage the kids similarly it was chaos. He wound up standing at the counter pointing to one at a time to come up and order. "Brat one, you're up! Brat two, next!"

It was probably just as well he lapsed into English, given the looks Isumi gave him at the names. But honestly-all the burgers with *just such* trimming and wrong size french fries and *that wasn't the toy I wanted* and *but there's ketchup I can't eat this...*

And the whole time Sai was back in the Go salon, alone, with those regular people waltzing around with no idea he was there. It made Hikaru twitchy, unable to put it out of his mind, but the kids were too distracting for him to think of a way to make sure it never happened again. He could only resolve he would find a way later; no more leaving Sai in public.

Further hassle in making sure they had all the kids' stuff before they left and hadn't lost anybody in the bathrooms, and Hikaru breathed a sigh of relief as they finally got back to Go and Sai. Next time they could all just bring peanut butter and jelly. (Ha ha. Next time.)

Akira really didn't have any intention to make himself a part of Hikaru's strange amateur tournament, and for the most part he didn't. Except for getting mixed up in the confusion of sorting kids in the beginning, he stayed out in the main salon and played against regular customers like usual. And peeked in the back room like his father did once or twice whenever he was between games, just to see how it was going and if it was really working out as well as Hikaru seemed to expect.

Hikaru's students-er, "Jaro's Disciples"-were a surprisingly rowdy bunch, so much so that Akira ventured into the room several times to look at their games in progress just to see if they really could possibly know how to play well. They could. He thought at least a

couple of them might stand a chance of passing the insei test with a few months' more practice, but their behavior...

Hikaru was definitely their teacher.

He was a good teacher, too, Akira observed during the postgame discussions where Waya and Hikaru filled the roles of mentor and pointed out mistakes and where improvements could be made. He was steady, focused, *tactful* ; still cheerful but not as upbeat or as easily distracted as usual. He sounded way more mature than normal-and he spoke almost exclusively in formal archaic Japanese.

Since Akira had heard it once before, it only threw him for a few seconds before he was able to (mostly) filter it out as Hikaru being weird again. Judging by the expressions of the rest of the teens in the room, this was their first exposure. Only Hikaru's students acted like it was nothing strange at all.

Which was strange itself. Well, they must be who he practiced speaking with that way then... maybe he'd developed it as a tactic to get them to pay attention? It certainly worked if so; they listened and responded to him the same way the insei did to Waya and the girl insei-Nase, was it?-with genuine respect for a teacher. And it wasn't surprising, given the way Hikaru spoke to them; the only surprising part was that it was Hikaru who was saying it.

But something bothered Akira about the way Hikaru instructed the kids, which kept him drifting back in to listen to the discussions even when he could have accepted more games himself in the main salon. It took him awhile to figure it out, buried in the bizarrrity of everything else about the event. Something about the way Hikaru spoke...

His accent was as pronounced as ever; his pronunciation was still off fairly frequently, though the highly formal Japanese seemed to smooth out his tendency to add emphasis to some syllables like in English. But the words-when had Hikaru learned some of those? And his *phrasing* . Was perfect.

Well, not *perfect* ; some of it was odd, old, but still-technically correct. And that wasn't right. Hikaru had improved greatly in the months he'd finally started learning Japanese, but he was still a beginner, and sounded like it. He messed up the order of words and used wrong words all the time.

Except now he wasn't.

Which, no matter how Akira looked at it or what explanations he tried to find, didn't make any sense at all.

What was going on?

In which Hikaru and Sai become partners

A/N: More from Akira's pov next chapter... he needs time to process.
:)

Stepping Stones

~ 29 ~ In which Hikaru and Sai become partners

The last round of games ended conveniently a little early, which plunged the back room into a chaos of trying to clean up and keep a miniature horde of kids entertained until their parents showed up. In any other circumstances Hikaru would have found an inescapable reason to be elsewhere in the first fifteen seconds, but as it was he waded cheerfully through the midst of it, casually picking loose Sai's stones and stuffing them first in his pocket and then his backpack while absolutely no one noticed.

Waya and Akari were occupied defending the cookies-'Not after the games, at the door-' Isumi had been recruited to find someone's missing sock- *'Here, I see it!'*- Miniboss was dogging Hikaru enumerating how he should up Akari's training so she wouldn't suck so much next time-'Kozue will be here next time, not Akari-'

Akira's dad reappeared and started chatting with some of the kids about how the tournament had gone, fortunately after Hikaru finished collecting and stowing away the stones. He decided it was high time to go see if any parents had shown up yet. Or see where Akira had gotten off to. Or chat with the nice receptionist lady.

Parents began to arrive and cull their kids from the herd. Hikaru posted himself out in the main salon, with Nase, to wave the kids off and admonish them one last time not to eat their cookies until they were outside. Almost all of them chirped gratifying variations of 'Thanks I had fun!'

'This was fun,' Nase commented to him during a brief lull. 'Are you doing it again?'

'This headache-?' Hikaru started to scoff.

The sniffly insei, now bundled up to his nose in a scarf his mom must have just brought, stopped as he went by with parent and piped, 'Please tell your students I will be better next time! When do we play again?'

'In a month. Or two.'

The insei said goodbye and thank you and Hikaru said goodbye and glad you had fun. Nase was gracious enough to just look her amusement instead of say it.

'I was saying, yes we do it again,' Hikaru invented, though he suspected it was too late to save face, 'if Mr. Touya agrees.'

But heck, why not? The kids had liked it, Sai'd had a great time; it hadn't been that bad.

'Maybe he's still here. I'll ask.'

Nase turned and headed toward the back. It struck Hikaru that she was an excellent friend he really ought to have around more often, especially when ghost-like formal-Japanese adults he needed to impress were concerned. Another couple kids swirled past he cheerfully bade goodbye.

"Hikaru?"

'Hey Akira!' Hikaru grinned as the other boy came up beside him. "Sorry for all the noise out here. But that didn't go so bad after all, huh?"

"... Yes." For some reason Akira looked preoccupied with something. "Hikaru, you always teach your students like that?"

"Eh? Well they're not my-" Oh screw it, he was the intermediary.
"Yeah, why?"

"Where did you learn to talk like that? So... practiced. You sound like... you know lots of Japanese."

What- *oh. shit* .

He'd been speaking for Sai. Like he always did with the gang, running his mouth repeating whatever the ghost said because if he stopped to concentrate he'd get distracted with solving the meaning of words and his own opinions. Except he wasn't in the shed, he was around his *friends*, who knew this was his second and still practically infant language...

He wished, fervently, that one of the kids would suddenly come back in screaming about a crazy man with an axe. Or the building would crumble around them in a freak earthquake.

"My gramps," Hikaru blurted. How did that make any sense? "He, uh, teaches-taught me like that, so I guess I just tried doing the same-"

Akira still looked dubious. Oh god, how had he let this happen? Waya and the others were probably already scheduling brain scans for him.

"He... taught Jaro Japanese, and... uh..."

Akira looked baffled. Why did it have to be Akira so he couldn't switch to Japanese and then claim mistranslation?

Hikaru sighed and pulled Akira away from the door. Not that he was really concerned about their being overheard at the moment rather than just being believed, but no reason to invite anyone passing to listen in. Or lose a couple extra seconds to figure out what to say- and untangle what he'd already said.

"Okay, see, you know how I pretty much dumped Go for a while when I had to start learning Japanese?"

Akira nodded.

"Well, Jaro found out-I mean, I was playing him a lot, and then I didn't have time, and he decided to help me learn Japanese instead..." Truth would not work here. "But he didn't know it either, so he started learning from my gramps..." *Please don't ask how he and Gramps know each other.* "And, so, since I started playing again he's been teaching me in Japanese, like my gramps I guess, and when I started passing it on to the squirts-" was that safe to admit? "- I guess I just did it the same way without even thinking. I mean, it's not me teaching them really, I'm just passing on what Jaro says."

Akira considered, his expression wrinkled in a still faintly dubious frown. "Your teacher must learn very fast," he said slowly. "English is very different to Japanese."

Hikaru put his father in Sai's place mentally for a second. "Got that right," he sighed enviously. Then he paused. Was that really realistic? How long did that give Sai to have supposedly gone from nothing to fluent? "If he didn't know some already."

"Is Jaro not American?"

"Um..." He was not referencing Waya's ridiculous conspiracy theories online, no sane person would credit those. He stuck his hands in his pockets and shrugged. "I don't actually know. I only ever played online until I came here, so I haven't actually met him in person. He could be from anywhere. No borders on the Internet, you know."

"Oh." Akira still looked surprised, but that was better than suspicious.

"We don't talk about personal stuff, just Go," Hikaru added, hoping that would sound credible, and tried to discreetly fumble with his

phone in his pocket. Why hadn't he learned how to make it ring without looking?

"Oh," Akira repeated, slowly. "Are you s-"

"Whoops, hang on!" Hikaru pulled his phone out and mashed buttons, careful to hold it so Akira couldn't see the screen. "Text from Mom-oh, sorry, gotta get home, I'm late. We can talk more later, okay?"

He rushed back to the back room to collect his backpack and Sai, fervently glad he'd already collected the stones from underneath the tables, and told everybody there that he was late getting home and his mom was mad so he had to go right now, sorry-bye-see you later, so none of them had the opportunity to interrogate him too. On the way to the front door he paused by Akira one more time and added in a hurried undertone, "And hey, uh, don't tell anybody I know Jaro, okay, because... er... not the kinda attention I want if that got out."

There. That sounded more tactful than *those people are fanatics and I'd fear for my life*.

Then before Akira could answer he looked at his phone again, yelled, "Bye!" and ran for the station.

He didn't stop to catch his breath until he got on the bus and sat down, and then slumped forward with his head in his hands, blocking out the rest of the world, including Sai's concerned queries beside him. Shit. He'd talked for Sai in front of his friends, they'd noticed-of *course* they had-and he'd probably convinced Akira he was crazy with such a random made-up excuse.

His *gramps* had taught Jaro Japanese? Seriously? Why hadn't he come up with something like... like...

Fortunately the bus trip was long enough for Hikaru to work through his initial panic, self-recrimination and attempts to conjure a genie to make the last day not have happened before he got home. He also

calmed down enough to hold his cell phone to one ear as a prop and explain to the ghost what had happened and why it would be very bad if it happened again. Multiple-personality Hikaru locked in a therapist's office and Sai back in the shed with no visitors and no Go for who knew how long.

By the time he got home the last of his panic had firmed into resolve. He passed his mother with a brief exchange of "yeah had fun" "dinner will be ready in a bit" and went straight to his room and shut the door before turning to face Sai with his conclusion.

'We talk too different. We can't go out like that again.'

' Yes...' But the ghost was upset, fan whirring in gentle anxiety.

They'd pretty much promised the kids more tournaments, after all, and Hikaru couldn't think of a time he'd seen the ghost look happier before today except maybe when he'd first figured out how to cart him around with the stones instead of the whole board.

'So, I will practice until I sound like you.'

' *I'll help,*' Sai promised instantly.

'But you have to practice too. Not sound like a different century, or I can't talk for you anymore.'

The fan stuttered for a few seconds before Sai nodded. '*I will. I promise!*' The fan picked up to a whirl again. '*But... how?*'

'Start here.' Hikaru opened his laptop, navigated to YouTube, and decided on Gurren Lagann to begin Sai's introduction to modern Japanese vernacular. It had worked for him; why shouldn't it work for a ghost too? 'Just pay attention to words. I'll explain what happens after dinner.'

After dinner they divided the rest of the evening into Sai watching more anime clips and attempting to parrot the characters' slang (which was usually hilarious) and Hikaru attempting to explain things like giant earth-boring drill mechas that operated on fantasy physics in formal Japanese (which usually made the explanation incomprehensible to both of them). By the end of a couple hours Sai could repeat 'Who the hell do you think I am?' perfectly on prompt, which led to excessive preening on his part and endless chortling on Hikaru's as he fed the ghost questions to use his new line on.

By the end of the night Sai had clued in on what exactly he was saying and was so horrified he went into a still-fanned, hat-bent sulk and refused to even acknowledge the laptop's existence until Hikaru finally switched it to Prince of Tennis. Even then he only listened, with a deeply suspicious expression, and refused to repeat anything out loud.

Hikaru might have been able to get him over it faster if he'd acted contrite instead of pointing out that everybody in anime worth watching was rude, fine he was sorry, but come on, admit it, it was a *little* bit funny...

In which Akira adds clues up

Stepping Stones

~ 30 ~ In which Akira adds clues up

Hikaru woke up the next morning already trying to figure out how to let Sai keep studying while he had to go to school. If only he hadn't already thought of leaving the TV on and his mom had banned it; TV would be even more perfect now...

Then he woke up fully and realized he didn't have school again until tomorrow, so he diverted his brainpower to deciding whether he could realistically fake having caught a raging flu from the sniffly insei yesterday and therefore be unable to talk to any of his friends for a few days.

He and Sai resolved, since the day was free, to improve their Japanese as much and as fast as possible, and spent the morning practicing industriously. Except for all their industry they didn't make much progress. Sai listened but still refused to venture more than a few words from any anime, and Hikaru put in more effort than he'd given the ghost before but could only keep it up so long before he started going crazy. After a few hours they both agreed to let each other take a break, and breathed a silent sigh of relief for the chance to do something they actually wanted to.

Hikaru's idea of a break was to get up, stretch his legs, and *do* something for a while. Sai's was to sit there and play Go.

Which, Hikaru realized, was another problem: as if they'd really both had enough time for Go before. He pondered it during their compromise, while he dug out his soccer ball and kicked it around the block a couple times, then grabbed a snack and sat down to log on Jaro. He had to sound more like Sai, and Sai be more sound-

likeable, if there was ever any possibility of taking the ghost out around other people again. Which, given the kids from both teams wanted another tournament and he'd already agreed, would be awfully hard to back out of.

Unless Akira's dad didn't let them use the salon again.

Unless one of the kids found some other place they could play, which he wouldn't put past the neighborhood brats now that they'd seemed motivated.

So he and Sai really needed to practice their Japanese. But if it was already taking this long for such small results, they wouldn't have any time for Go at all, and he'd just started playing Akira again. He couldn't slack off now! And Sai had his rep as the God of NetGo to maintain, and pros to lure out of hiding and squash like bugs.

There had to be some way of rearranging their days, using their time more efficiently. Maybe if they studied like this; Sai could play Go while Hikaru practiced formal speech from him, and Hikaru could play Go while Sai watched anime-but that would be splitting Sai's attention between playing and instructing Hikaru, and that wasn't fair. It would probably also distract Sai from the anime in favor of critiquing Hikaru's game, or insisting on playing against him, which would throw any study out the window.

Plus that still left all those hours Hikaru was stuck in school that Sai did nothing, which suddenly seemed like such a waste. But the ghost couldn't play new videos, couldn't turn pages, couldn't do anything for itself.

Sai won his game. Hikaru switched tabs back to YouTube and threw a bunch of episodes onto a playlist to see how long auto-play would run without any touch to the trackpad or keyboard.

The answer was not remotely close to as long as Hikaru would be in school. Sai turned on him at the end with a slightly manic look anyway and set to lecturing like a drill sergeant, probably in an

attempt to make Hikaru suffer in kind. By the end of that lesson, in spite of all Hikaru's resolve to apply himself and rationalizations why he had to, he grabbed the first chance of escape he thought of.

'I must see Gramps,' he blurted, far more formally than he would have a couple days ago and far less carefully than he would have just a few hours ago. 'To tell him-in case Akira talks to him.'

Never mind that the odds of that were probably about half a billion to one. Sai obviously felt the same, because he agreed immediately while Hikaru packed the go ke into his backpack.

It took quite a while to explain to his grandfather the conversation following the Mini-Me tournament, not just because first he had to explain the tournament. His gramps kept making him rephrase himself, evidently disbelieving details, and Sai kept interjecting his own additions and perspective. Not that Hikaru could really blame the ghost given Gramps was the only other person around he could talk (almost) directly with, and he was already used to parroting for the squirts, but if only all he needed to learn was 'Sai says...'

After he finished explaining it was even longer before his gramps stopped laughing enough to talk. First he laughed over the concept of a tournament pitting insei against a random gaggle of neighborhood hooligans, which he seemed to approve without reserve. Then he laughed over Hikaru's bumbled claim that the old man had taught the ghost Japanese, which Hikaru thought not nearly as consoling as a grandparent ought to be.

"Graa-aamps," he whined when his grandfather didn't stop after a suitably brief time. 'What do I do?'

As soon as he said it he realized that was the real reason he'd come-who else could he ask advice from, who understood everything and wouldn't think he was crazy?

'What to do? You already did,' his grandfather snorted. 'Now, when someone asks, just say I told you already. Don't make excuses, don't

act scared-don't say it over and over.'

Hikaru considered, reluctantly, but that did seem to be the only answer left. Bluff through it-act too confident to keep being questioned.

Right. Easy.

'But what about talking?' he sighed, trying to figure out how to phrase the question. 'We need to learn now, but I have school, and Sai won't practice.'

The ghost immediately started protesting at that, but Hikaru stuck out his tongue briefly and refused to parrot, so Gramps didn't hear it.

'Well, how do you practice?'

He probably should have thought twice before explaining, though, because Gramps *always* picked Sai's side.

'Anime? You waste time on-'

'It helped me-'

'-Doesn't even use real words-'

"-Quality entertainment! And TV's banned since-"

Once they hashed out that Gramps and Sai were both dinosaurs incapable of appreciating fun and Hikaru was a punk incapable of respecting his elders or lessons of the past (Hikaru got swatted at, then his hair ruffled, and grumblingly apologized for leaving Sai out of the conversation and not asking his opinions), they turned to solving the problem.

'Bring Sai here,' his gramps told him. 'He can watch TV here while you go to school. Then you study hard from him when you go home.'

Sai bowed and thanked his grandfather. Hikaru stared at him in disbelief for such a simple, elegant solution, then voluntarily hugged his gramps and thanked him too. 'But won't Gramma-'

'My problem.' The old man waved it away confidently. 'Now, come here. What TV does Sai like to watch?'

Sai paid the TV far more attention than he'd seemed to Hikaru's anime, and started repeating phrases almost immediately, evidently trusting Gramps' choice of programming more than Hikaru's. Hikaru sulked but provided Gramps the details of Sai's old soap opera anyway, and even got a snack while he sat back and watched his grandfather expound on modern Japanese life to the ghost he couldn't see or hear, and the ghost's expressions of clarity or confusion to the explanations it couldn't ask for. They seemed to work surprisingly well despite the communication barrier.

On the bus home Sai resumed instructing Hikaru, who concentrated much better since he knew the lesson would only last as long as the trip. He used his cell phone as a prop again to practice words, but it didn't sound much like half of a conversation. Didn't he have a pair of headphones lying around somewhere in his room...? Better to pretend to be listening to a language tape or audiobook or something.

When they got back to Hikaru's room there was his laptop, still open to YouTube, on his desk and Sai's goban on the floor in the corner. Boy and spirit glanced at each, then at each other. They ought to keep practicing Japanese...

'Two bus rides, every day,' Hikaru offered. 'If I study hard then...?'

'I will learn with Heihachi,' the ghost promised. 'But we practice speech too. While we play...?'

'Good idea!' Hikaru grinned. They both headed for the goban.

They'd barely gotten seated when Hikaru's mother called from somewhere toward the front of the house, "Hello, honey. Your homework finished yet?"

Hikaru froze, Go stone just suspended between his fingers over the pot, and swallowed a whimper. Sai looked from him to the doorway and back anxiously.

Hikaru squirmed. "Um... almost... just taking a break..."

"You've already worked on it all morning? That's wonderful, how about your father check it over for you after lunch."

Hikaru mouthed several bad words, which Sai fortunately didn't seem to understand any better than the rest of the English, and called back, "Yeah, uh... might hit a snag..." He gave up and sighed. "Fine, I'm doing it now."

Which meant he had to disappoint Sai too, although the ghost was obviously already expecting something was up from the unintelligible conversation. Hikaru considered briefly after explaining the situation. He didn't, strictly speaking, need homework help anymore now that the tournament was over. But when the homework was the roadblock in their way of getting to play Go...

He didn't even have to ask as he and ghost moved over to his desk. Sai settled beside him, and Hikaru grabbed two textbooks for subjects he had yet to finish and flipped them open to the last folded pages. The goban waited behind them; all they had to do was wade through the pages of formulas and characters before them first.

Instead of spending the rest of the weekend after Hikaru's tournament practicing Go, Akira wound up spending quite a few hours in an inattentive fog. Hikaru had almost seemed panicked explaining his near-perfect speech, and his explanation didn't make a lot of sense. Was it his grandfather he'd learned it from, or his

teacher, and why would the two have anything to do with each other...?

Well, he knew a little bit about Hikaru's grandfather from things the other boy had mentioned. Hikaru had started playing him-in person?-once he started playing Go again after he stopped to learn Japanese, and according to Hikaru it was his grandfather's fault he'd picked up any formal Japanese...

Except now Hikaru said *Jaro* taught him Japanese, which Jaro learned from Hikaru's grandfather? No matter how Akira thought about it that still sounded strange.

As for Hikaru's teacher... Hikaru said he learned online, back in America, from someone-someone obviously very good, judging by Hikaru's skill, and yet Hikaru had been shocked to learn of the professional Go world. What little Akira had learned of Jaro since Hikaru mentioned the name was that the player was relatively new and extremely good.

Akira picked up a stone and set it on his goban without any regard for placement, then just stared at it. After a moment he picked up a stone of the opposite color and set it down on the other side of the board and then stared again without seeing.

What if Hikaru's mysterious teacher was his grandfather?

Hikaru had grown up in America, without knowing Japanese, so he could have learned Go by playing online with a relative he wouldn't otherwise have much contact with. Then when he moved to Japan, he started playing his grandfather in person and learning (very formal, like only very old people spoke) Japanese from him at the same time. And Hikaru seemed like he'd pretty much refused to learn Japanese until he was forced, so he hadn't picked any up until then. That made a lot more sense-

Except then why did the Jaro account only show up so recently?

Akira placed a few more stones in a pattern so random they didn't translate to a game at all. The movement helped him think but the attempt to read meaning into the stones distracted him, so he found himself rearranging the stones into geometric shapes instead.

The Jaro account couldn't be much older than when Hikaru moved to Japan, so it obviously hadn't been used to play Hikaru in America. Maybe his grandfather had created it to introduce Hikaru to the Japanese Go site... maybe something in his grandfather's life had changed about the time Hikaru moved to Japan, and his grandfather just had the time or inclination to play more online, against more people than Hikaru...

His grandfather must play against more opponents than just Hikaru, to have achieved such a high level of skill. If he was Jaro.

But if Akira was right, why was Hikaru so secretive about it; why didn't he want anyone to know he knew Jaro? Why had he lied to Akira about it (although badly)? He'd always seemed honest up until then-often overenthusiastic in Akira's opinion, and sometimes inaccurate, but not deliberately untruthful. Hikaru *couldn't* really be that deceitful. Surely.

But...

Akira finally left his goban for his computer to browse NetGo again. In short order he found the forums, and, surprisingly, instead of having to look for any topics about Jaro he only had to choose which ones to look at first. There was a *lot* of interest for one regular skilled player out of many...

... An almost terrifying level of interest. The mysterious Jaro probably had to turn reclusive about his online playing just to keep any privacy at all. No wonder Hikaru didn't want a part of it. Suddenly his attempt to distance himself from his slipup seemed perfectly reasonable.

All right then, Akira decided as he powered off his computer to return to his goban. He would have anyway, but he'd definitely honor Hikaru's request to not say anything about his connection to the NetGo player. And he'd keep to himself the secret of who Jaro probably was; he didn't want anyone getting the idea he might know anything either. He just wouldn't talk about Jaro at all.

Hikaru was ready when Waya called, as expected, to find out whether Hikaru had received a recent head injury and developed a split personality he'd neglected to inform his friends of. As soon as Hikaru recognized the number on his cell phone he picked it up and headed straight into the kitchen before answering. Since it was Waya, all Hikaru had to do was say 'Hey' before the older boy went off without any further response needed for a few moments. Hikaru used the time to rifle through the cabinets until he found the pepper shaker and unscrewed its lid.

Waya wound up, unknowingly helpfully, with, 'What is wrong with you?'

Hikaru tried to pinching his nose half shut to see if he'd sound stuffy. 'A cold.'

'What-' Waya started.

Hikaru stuck the open pepper shaker under his nose and inhaled as hard as he could. The series of explosive sneezes that resulted silenced the other end of the phone.

'I got sick. From that insei,' Hikaru blamed shamelessly, trying to talk without breathing through his nose at all like when he really had a cold (not just because now his nose hurt). 'I can't talk much.'

This was Waya, though; he wouldn't get away with no explanation at all.

'My grandfather taught me. So I teach like him.'

'But he wouldn't say exact-' Waya started to insist.

'Yes,' Hikaru disagreed. 'When he found out I teach kids, he taught me what to say, and made me say it right.'

No way was he breathing the word "Jaro" to Waya; he didn't want a red flag in front of the bull this time. He should've kept his head enough to leave Jaro out of the explanation to Akira.

Waya still sounded suspicious. 'Your grandfather-'

Hikaru wasn't sure which synonym to "crazy" Waya used. 'Yes,' he agreed anyway. His gramps could take the rep if he ever found out. Serve him right for not spoiling his only grandkid more.

Waya started to talk again, so Hikaru stuck the pepper shaker back under his nose and sneezed furiously again. Then he sniffed as loudly as his tenderized nostrils could stand and added, 'Bye, Waya,' and hung up.

There. Now he'd just have to keep stuffing it down everyone's throats until they gave up on him, and maybe distract them with other stuff so they'd forget faster... and breathe through his mouth the rest of the night. Geez, it wasn't that like that'd been *chili* pepper...

In which Hikaru visits a school festival

A/N: This story is probably completely screwed up timeline-wise compared to canon by now, but I don't have the time or the energy to read through all of Hikaru no Go again to try to figure out what time of year the school festival and/or tournament (among other stuff) happened. So let's just say we've reached the land of AU. :P

Stepping Stones

~ **31** ~ In which Hikaru attends a school festival

Tsutsui missed a couple days at school, which as far as Hikaru was concerned proved just how sick he was since the other boy seemed to *like* being there, and when he showed up again proved not the slightest bit interested in how well Hikaru could really speak Japanese-if Akari had even told him.

'Go tournament!' he exclaimed as soon as the three of them met up in their Go hangout room.

Hikaru squinted at him. "Why are you wearing a surgical mask?"

The English words didn't translate, so he gestured at his own face in mimicry of the mask's shape.

Hikaru understood only the first part of Tsutsui's explanation, 'Just in case-', but made a guess the last part meant still contagious. Except why would he come back to school if he wasn't all better? Shouldn't the nurse send him home?

Hikaru mused briefly on whether it would be worthwhile to get people to stop talking for a moment so he could write words down when he didn't understand them and get Akira or Isumi to translate them for him later. Probably too much work, and if he started handing them sheets of stuff to explain he probably ought to pay them something in exchange.

When he paid attention to Tsutsui and Akari again, Tsutsui seemed to be back to babbling about a Go tournament. Which certainly had the potential to be interesting if only he'd slow down enough for Hikaru to follow. Akari was usually good at remembering that, but she seemed too involved in listening and answering herself this time.

Hikaru waited until the older boy wound down a little and both of the other two turned to Hikaru expectantly, like they wanted his input. Then he recited, 'Hi. I am American and just learning to speak this language.'

Akari's face turned pink. 'Oh, sorry-'

Tsutsui looked a little bewildered, but then he got it too and started to explain again-barely any slower, but now Akari scolded him to slow down every couple minutes and then started on her own simpler explanations, which would have helped if that didn't mean they were talking over each other.

'So, school Go tournament?' Hikaru finally repeated the gist of what he picked up. 'For us?'

Tsutsui nodded eagerly and said something Hikaru didn't recognize.

'We need to-what?' He looked from one native speaker to the other for a clue.

Akari worried her lip while Hikaru wished absently that her grasp of English equaled Akira's. 'It means-'

'We need more people,' Tsutsui put in, finally remembering Hikaru's working vocabulary and downgrading his to overlap. 'We need team of three, we only have two for boy and one for girl, so-'

'We need three boys? Okay,' Hikaru shrugged. He leaned down and rooted through his backpack for a moment before coming up with a slightly battered baseball cap. He flapped it a couple times to restore

the shape then crammed it on Akari's head and surveyed his handiwork. 'There.'

Akari squeaked in dismay. Tsutsui sputtered. Hikaru wanted to joke that she just needed to let her facial hair go for a couple days and she'd pass fine, but he didn't know how to say it in Japanese and they didn't understand English, so he had to settle for, 'Looks good.'

Akari squeaked again, still hunched under the brim of the hat. Tsutsui apparently decided to just ignore Hikaru's helpful solution and plunged back into whatever he'd been planning.

Hikaru decided he'd reached his limit for trying to understand Japanese for the day, and was mentally working on how to phrase that as a declaration in Japanese when Akari said something while looking at him. Hikaru returned attention to his surroundings to see Tsutsui and Akari both looking at him expectantly.

He held his hands up, fingers spread. 'No more. I am done planning. Tell me what to do, where to go, you do everything else.'

Akari looked like she was about to protest. Tsutsui looked at her, shrugged, and continued presumably with whatever they were going on about. Hikaru snatched his cap back from Akari and settled it on his own head, pulling the brim down over his face, to see if he could take a nap.

'What do you think.' Hikaru leaned back from the table to let the waitress set his ramen down without letting his attention waver from his subject. 'Make list of pros on forum and every one who doesn't challenge Jaro say something like 'too scared'.'

Waya leaned forward over the table and smacked him on the head. 'No. Idiot. You offend every pro in Japan.'

Hikaru rubbed his head and sulked as he stirred his ramen. 'Okay, then... post Jaro comments on pro games? To show he's better?'

'Moron. Why play someone who insults you?'

Hikaru made a face at him. 'Jaro beat you by midgame.'

'Your grandfather should talk for you always,' Waya retorted. 'If he's real.'

Since there was already a spoon handy in Hikaru's bowl, he felt it a reasonable use to flick a bit of his ramen at Waya's face. It missed anyway, so it really wasn't fair for Waya to lean over and grind his knuckles on Hikaru's head before Hikaru squirmed away.

'What if Jaro schedules games to challenge pro, so if pro doesn't play, everyone else online says pro was scared?'

Hikaru didn't catch exactly what kind of stupid Waya called him for that, but he was pretty sure it was the stupidest.

'How you people live in America?' Waya demanded. 'Listen. Pros don't know Jaro-have to tell them, and tell them why to care. Isumi talk to reporters sometimes now for his games. Isumi can say 'I study Jaro games,' then reporter studies Jaro, then reporter tells Go world about Jaro, then pros get curious.'

'People have written on Jaro!' Hikaru protested, slurping a loose noodle. 'I read them!'

Waya just rolled his eyes. 'Online. Anyone writes online.'

Hikaru sulked again for a moment. 'Okay. Isumi can help?'

Waya nodded firmly, tucking a bite of ramen into his own mouth with chopsticks much more neatly. He chewed and swallowed before laying out, 'Most pros not online, so have to talk, have to push them on. Isumi can talk to them now, so let him. Be patient. *You* say nothing.'

Waya grabbed the spoon out of Hikaru's hand just before he loaded another bite to flick. Hikaru squawked in outrage and grabbed for it

back.

'Since Jaro speak no Japanese, better your grandfather speak for him than you,' Waya taunted, holding the spoon up out of reach.

Hikaru hurriedly turned a snicker into a cough at the thought of how convoluted that would be. 'Uh... give me that. Jerk.'

"Hey Gramps, Gran," Hikaru called as he toed off his sneakers and headed straight for the sofa where Sai, oddly, barely looked up to greet him. Hikaru flopped down beside the ghost and scrunched up his face at the TV. "There's a Go channel, seriously... no, you know what, I'm not surprised by anything on Japanese TV." He remembered to switch languages before asking Sai, 'What game?'

Sai brightened like a lamp switched on and gestured enthusiastically as he explained. Evidently some two pros were going for some title and playing well. Hikaru noted that Go TV made for decent Japanese lessons since he could guess most of the words he couldn't understand by paying attention to the screen.

Sai obviously paid it more attention though, given how high he jumped when Hikaru's cell phone went off. Hikaru fumbled to grab it, yelled 'Sorry!' when his grandmother called something about the noise, and got it to his ear without actually registering what name was displayed.

Akari's voice greeted him cheerfully before mentioning the reason for her call. Hikaru's forehead wrinkled as he tried to place the sounds she said.

'What word?'

Akari repeated it, then tried something else Hikaru didn't recognize either. Sai leaned almost into Hikaru's shoulder to listen.

Akari evidently gave up trawling her mental thesaurus and just went on. 'Meet me at school tomorrow.'

'School off tomorrow,' Hikaru pointed out.

Akari's reply left no doubt that, regardless of tomorrow not being a school day, he was for whatever reason supposed to meet her there. And the reason seemed to have something to do with Go. Hikaru began to suspect he should have paid more attention to Akari's and Tsutsui's conversations even though it was so much easier not to.

'Okay,' he finally agreed, rather than confess ignorance. 'When?'

Sai disappeared from Hikaru's peripheral vision as Hikaru hung up. When he glanced sideways, he met with a full-strength puppy dog gaze of entreaty.

"Uh..." Oh, why not. 'Want to come?'

Sai burst into beaming, fan-waving chatter. Hikaru pondered the fairness of a millennia-old ghost possibly having a better grasp of modern Japanese than he did when he'd probably had ten times the exposure.

The next morning, Hikaru loaded Sai's pots into his backpack, shrugged it on, and then paused. He didn't relish lugging that weight around all day, especially at school, where his backpack might present an unfounded impression that he was equipped for any school-related activities that might come up by being at school on the weekend.

So he shrugged it off, took the pots out, and stuffed his jacket pockets full of stones instead. Sai followed him giddily out of the house.

Arriving at school apparently validated all of Sai's expectations that this outing was destined to be a fantastic adventure, while baffling all

of Hikaru's suspicions. There were a *lot* of people already there. Why so many? And what was with the booths and things that seemed to be set up all over the place?

Akari appeared from the crowd moments before Hikaru could decide to get lost in it or leave, and tugged him down one path-turned-aisle until she stopped in front of a plain card table with a big sign, the only character on which Hikaru thought he recognized was 'Go.'

Akari beamed as she showed it to him. Sai chattered a mile a minute, whisking around to stare in a new direction every five seconds.

'... It's ours?' Hikaru finally guessed when Akari looked like she expected a response. 'Why?'

'To get new players!' Akari dragged him around the table and sat him down in a folding chair beside her.

Sai bubbled over with approval, still at a rate at least five times too fast for Hikaru to actually understand. Hikaru looked around and considered asking again what on earth the circus around them was.

Akari evidently noticed him looking. She started pointing to the different booths near them: 'Art club, kendo club, music club...'

Hikaru looked back down at their bare little table. 'Go club?'

Akari huffed at him. 'Yes!'

Huh. When had that happened?

'Okay. What now?'

For a while Hikaru didn't have to do anything except sit and watch while Akari tried to flag down passersby and, when successful, waved cans of soda as prizes if they solved Tsutsui's baby solve-where-the-next-stone-goes tsumego problems. Sai made himself an assistant hawker that not a single person showed any sign of

noticing. Hikaru was shortly glad of his enthusiasm, though, as whenever Sai got distracted from calling he pestered Hikaru about how much did Akari play and had she improved and would Hikaru spread out all the tsumego for Sai to solve?

Hikaru mostly spent the time in between Akari's dupes wondering if all the people in sight really went to his school and why the other clubs around didn't seem to have anything related to their clubs set up. One booth looked like they were selling food.

Eventually Akari stretched her legs out, looked toward the food booth and asked Hikaru, 'Your turn now?'

'Okay.' Hikaru shrugged.

'Anyone who can play, tell them to join,' was Akari's parting instruction before she disappeared into the crowd.

Sai continued hawking at an even more enthusiastic volume. Hikaru sat in silence and decided that, if there was anyone nearby that actually knew the game, they were much more likely to find him than he was to find them. So he made himself as comfortable as he could on a metal chair and just looked for anyone looking back.

It only took a few minutes for him, and then Sai, to get bored of being ignored and look for entertainment for themselves. Hikaru stopped pretending he had no idea of the ghost's existence and papered the tabletop with the printouts of Tsutsui's tsumego. Sai solved them all as they went along arranging them in order from easiest to hardest. Hikaru turned each one around as Sai finished it to solve it himself.

By the time Hikaru made it to the last few Sai was bored again and urging him to challenge passersby to solve them too. Since absolutely no one was paying attention, Hikaru let himself practice suitable phrasing at normal speaking volume with the ghost.

'Beat me... fastest... win?'

Sai offered corrections. Hikaru mouthed a few dubious ancient-sounding words without repeating them.

'Solve faster than me, win prize.'

He was fairly confident the word must be "prize" because Sai didn't seem to know what soda was.

'Ha! No challenge, brat.'

Sai exclaimed something about rudeness. Hikaru looked up with a start and demonstrated the improvement of his Japanese since their last encounter without a second thought: 'Bragging liar. Prove it.'

Kaga scoffed. 'Why should I?'

"Uh..." Sai's half-intelligible lecture maybe about respect effectively derailed Hikaru's logical chain of thought. 'Lose and... join Go club.'

Kaga roared with laughter. Then he countered with, if Hikaru understood correctly, if Hikaru lost he'd have to go jump in a lake.

Sai's appalled protest spurred Hikaru to shuffle away all the tsumego except the hardest three and dig out second copies of each and more pencils.

The first problem Hikaru solved first. Sai's cheer distracted him from remembering not to act smug. Then he solved the second problem first, and was in the middle of opening his mouth to announce 'Done!' when he realized that meant he'd just condemned himself to Kaga's company in the Go club from now on. Was the Go club every time he and Akari and Tsutsui met up in the empty classroom to play and goof around?

Kaga noticed Hikaru had solved it a second too late for Hikaru to reconsider and go find a lake to jump in.

'You solve these before?' he demanded.

Sai shrieked in outrage. Hikaru bristled. 'No!'

Kaga humphed. He started to say something Sai looked ready to pummel him for, but before he could really get started Akari returned, followed shortly after by Tsutsui. Tsutsui and Kaga got into a rapid spate that ended with Tsutsui turning over a couple used papers and drawing up a new tsumego. Akari awkwardly tried to chat with Hikaru and Kaga while they kept their backs turned. Hikaru gave her unnatural attention in an effort not to listen to Sai's advice to Tsutsui on how to improve the tsumego.

Hikaru solved the new one a second before Kaga shouted the same, and reveled in a loud gloat for all of the two seconds before Kaga got in noogie range. Then Tsutsui and Kaga went off into another conversation Hikaru made a stab at guessing involved the tournament Tsutsui constantly nattered about, and Hikaru made puppy eyes at Akari and got permission to go wander around and maybe get some food himself.

Maybe he could argue himself out of table-sitting duty for the rest of the day since he'd recruited someone. In the meantime, at least until Akari tracked him down for him to present the argument, he followed Sai's waving fan to see what else around looked interesting.

In which Jaro's Disciples explore

A/N: There are kittens in my yard. I barely remembered I should post this before getting back to kitten watching. :)

Stepping Stones

~ 32 ~ In which Jaro's Disciples stretch their wings

Hikaru had forgotten all about Miniboss's prediction that Squirrel would be out for blood for missing the mini-me tournament, until he opened his bedroom door and found Squirrel standing outside.

"Gyah!"

"One of your friends is here to see you, honey," his mother called cheerfully from the living room.

Squirrel was unimpressed with his surprise. 'You going to play where everybody else went?' he demanded.

'No,' Hikaru said instantly, discarding his intention to do exactly that. Like heck he wanted any of the neighborhood gang around Akira again-or anybody else who knew him-for a minimum of, say, twenty or thirty years.

Squirrel remained undaunted. 'Take me. My turn.'

'Pay to get in,' Hikaru countered. 'And pay to get there.'

Squirrel dug in his pockets and emerged with a fistful of yen. Hikaru assumed the word he said meant allowance.

'Your mom has to say yes.'

Squirrel frowned, then turned toward the front door. 'Don't go without me!'

Hikaru went back to his computer and translated a search for Go salons in the area, thinking as he went. He needed to practice sounding like Sai, especially when the kids and public were involved, but there was still the problem of how to smoothly mouth off whatever Sai said while also figuring out what he was saying. Practicing anonymously was definitely best, so no to Akira's dad's place, not the one he'd been to with Waya and Isumi, what did that leave closest...

Once he'd figured out how to get to where he wanted to go he poked his head into the living room. "Hey Mom, do we have a tape recorder lying around anywhere?"

His mother looked up from her book. "A tape recorder? What for?"

Any reason not to tell the truth? "Japanese practice. I wanna record what people say so I can study it la-"

Wait. *Darn* it, Sai was a ghost, the tape recorder wouldn't hear him if real people didn't-

Squirrel pounded on the front door.

"Later," Hikaru finished, and went to answer it.

'Mom said go,' Squirrel huffed.

'Did you say *where* ?' Hikaru asked.

Squirrel scowled mightily, then, when Hikaru didn't relent, dashed away again. Hikaru grabbed his jacket and headed to the shed. Sai would be disappointed if he found out he'd been left behind, and the kids would get suspicious if Hikaru suddenly didn't talk like him at all anymore.

Sai bounced as he decoded Hikaru's broken explanation while Hikaru stuffed a handful of each color stones into his jacket pockets.

Then Hikaru collected Squirrel, went back at his mom's call to accept a small tape recorder, and led the way to the nearest salon.

Once in the salon, surrounded by a bunch of geezers who all looked surprised to see kids there, Squirrel demonstrated his guts by promptly demanding a game. Hikaru stood behind Squirrel's chair with a bland smile and parroted whenever Sai made any teacherly remarks, then sounded out and repeated the words in his head, deducing meaning, until the next comment.

The first geezer played shidougo from the start, not very well considering Sai's one-eyebrowed silent criticism. Squirrel gloated over his win so much even Hikaru rolled his eyes and bopped him on the head instead of repeating all of Sai's scolding, and the next geezer summarily stomped him.

Squirrel dealt with the increasingly obvious loss with the same aplomb the rest of the gang used-creative insults and bluster that got cockier the more he fell behind. Fortunately his opponent didn't seem to take offense, as he returned as good as he got. Sai scolded both without effect until he finally went silent behind his fan until post-game discussion, which let Hikaru concentrate on following the conversation over the game without participating. Squirrel didn't pay any more attention to Hikaru's occasional bop on the head than he did to Sai's lectures, but Hikaru kept it up anyway for the amusement.

The other geezers that watched added commentary on top of the players', some of which Hikaru followed, some of which went over his head. He thought he heard one say "Yankee" and almost looked around and asked how on earth he could tell and where he'd picked up American slang, but decided he must have heard wrong.

Squirrel refused to admit to any curfew his mother had given him, so Hikaru finally dragged him back to the neighborhood and sent him home around sundown, then retired to the shed with Sai.

Sai was partly pleased at broadening a young player's horizons and partly appalled at the apparent state of modern Go players. Hikaru could admit that the geezers had proved a lot more creatively insulting than the kids at the insei tournament, and Squirrel had soaked up the education like a sponge, but he focused, again, on repeating whatever Sai said and then decoding it. This time Sai helped.

The result was daunting. The way Sai talked to the kids was so *formal* -Hikaru didn't understand half of it for sure until Sai clarified with simpler or more modern terms. The thought that the kids could understand it made the result of all his hard study so far just depressing.

Sai practiced saying the same things in simpler newer vocabulary from the start, while Hikaru practiced saying the same things in the best formal Japanese he could put together. The thought that practicing together presumably made their results better than they would get separately was also depressing, but if there was anything Hikaru had learned about Japanese by then, it was that it wasn't easy.

Just to check Hikaru played back the recording he'd taken in the salon, and his suspicion proved accurate. Not even a whisper of Sai's voice was anywhere on it. Squirrel's and the geezers' came through loud and clear though, and as Hikaru listened to it over again he realized he was going to have to have a talk with the gang, and soon.

When Miniboss showed up early for the usual meetup the next day with a fistful of yen and a demand to go to the salon, Hikaru revised "soon" to "now."

Which would go a lot better if he could write out the speech beforehand, preferably collaborating with Sai to get it in something of a blend of their voices, but Miniboss wouldn't be put off any easier than Squirrel had and he'd better give the talk before they went out in public again...

He waited until they were all gathered in the shed, and when he could finally start still didn't have any idea exactly what he was going to say. He cleared his throat a couple times to stall.

Miniboss started for him. 'I want to go to salon.'

The rest instantly clamored in echo.

'Fine,' Hikaru lied, raising his hands for quiet, ' *but* .'

The "but" worked, although their expressions suggested it wouldn't work long.

'When you go out,' Hikaru said, mind racing to put words together, 'who is your teacher?'

Six little faces blinked at him blankly. Sai tilted his head behind them.

'Jaro,' Hikaru prompted.

'You're Hikaru,' Miniboss pointed out.

'Yes,' Hikaru admitted. He really should have worked all this out somehow way before he ever turned the kids loose in public. Why oh why had he ever told his friends this gang had anything to do with Jaro? 'My teacher is Jaro. I teach you...' Sai enunciated a phrase behind his fan. Hikaru mentally translated it enough to guess the gist as fast he could and repeated it. 'I teach you as my teacher teaches me, so, your teacher is Jaro.'

Six little faces frowned at him dubiously. Sai edged around them to Hikaru's shoulder, coaching in a further murmur.

'I am a student,' Hikaru elaborated carefully. 'I do not teach, only... repeat. So, when you say who you learn from, it is not Hikaru, it is Jaro.'

Six little faces looked at each other and shrugged.

'Teacher's teacher is Jaro,' Miniboss echoed.

'Right.' Hikaru tried not to breathe an obvious sigh of relief. 'Now, lesson.'

'I want to go to salon!' Miniboss demanded.

'Money to get there, money to get in, mom has to say yes,' Hikaru rattled off.

The gang quieted in disappointment at such stringent requirements. Hikaru doubted it would stymie them for long, but at least it'd give him some breathing space in between brats popping up for day trips for a while. Maybe if they started missing candy their interest would drop off entirely.

The lesson proceeded normally, aside from Squirrel lording his salon experience over the rest of the group. Hikaru paid little attention to the kids' side discussions since he was talking for Sai, until he could have sworn he heard that word again.

Hikaru paused and looked up. Sai, in Hikaru's peripheral vision, stopped talking also and looked at him questioningly.

"Yankee?" Hikaru repeated, wondering if he needed to have another talk with the gang because why on earth did his being American matter and how had they ever heard the word anyway...

Squirrel, rather than actually answer, puffed up proudly. Miniboss, as if it meant something, asserted, 'We are yankee.'

Hikaru risked a quick glance sideways at Sai, but the ghost looked just as blank as him.

'What's yankee?' Hikaru asked.

The kids looked at each other... and Hikaru didn't recognize the words they used to explain. And of course, none of them had a grasp of English. Hikaru considered dismissing them all to go visit Akira,

committing himself to a padded room for a reason that actually didn't involve Sai, and instituting English study as a prerequisite to get into Go lessons from then on, and finally held up a hand to stem their chatter and pointed at Miniboss.

'One word. What's yankee?'

The kids conferred. Miniboss pronounced something. Hikaru dug out his translation dictionary and hunted through it for a romaji word with the same sound, Sai looking over his shoulder.

Eventually he found it. He stared at the entry. He repeated the word to Miniboss, then had him look at it in the book and confirm it was correct.

Sai, reading over his shoulder, looked shocked. The kids started squirming, half guilty, half defiant.

Hikaru started laughing so hard he dropped the book.

Hikaru looked up when Sai made a surprised noise, and spent a moment staring at the perfectly usual game in puzzlement before he realized Sai's gaze was directed to the chat box corner of the screen. 'What?' Hikaru asked, scanning the rows of characters. 'Who?'

Sai's fan underscored a particular line. Hikaru copied, pasted and translated it in Notepad, then stared in further puzzlement at the question *Who do you most want to play?* "Who is this guy?"

Sai absently directed more stones onto the board while the two of them hunted back through the chat log for more messages from the same person.

"Another blogger, huh..." Hikaru opened a new tab to search for the blog mentioned, and muddled through its latest few posts with the help of Sai and the translation software. "Cool."

He switched back to the original translated question in Notepad. Like heck it struck Hikaru as a good idea to actually give the guy an online interview like he wanted, but since he was posting a few questions anyway, and Sai seemed interested... 'You want to answer this?'

Somewhat to his surprise, Sai responded instantly. *"Touya Meijin."*

"Isn't that Akira's dad?" For a second Hikaru considered asking Akira to ask his dad to play Sai. Then he realized that might lead to another "why" interview with him facing Akira's dad and promptly dismissed the idea. 'Okay.'

He typed the name into Notepad, translated it, and gestured to the screen for Sai to check the accuracy of the translation. Sai made a satisfied sound, so Hikaru pasted the characters into the chat box and hit enter.

He resolutely didn't think about the chaos that might follow the God of NetGo actually responding to his psycho fans again. If it got Sai his game, psycho chaos was good this time.

In which Hikaru plays a school tournamen

A/N: Sorry for the delay in posting! Should go back to once-or-twice-weekly now that I managed to get my computer resurrected.

Stepping Stones

~ **33** ~ In which Hikaru attends a school tournament

Sai had obviously had a great time at the weird school carnival thing, so much so that Hikaru wasn't really surprised to get hit with puppy dog eyes when he explained he was off to a school Go tournament. He scrapped his offer to let Sai spend the day with Gramps before he'd even started to say it, shrugged mentally-it wasn't like the ghost was a *huge* hassle in public anyway-and loaded his pockets with stones.

Hikaru wasn't going to be impressed by just a bunch of schoolkids getting together to play Go, although it was kind of cool that there were enough schoolkids around to be able to do that, but having Sai along was like a constant secondhand dose of cranked-up-to-eleven excitement anyway. So by the time they got to the school hosting the tournament he'd decided cheerfully enough that it was only reasonable to have fun. And the atmosphere was pretty energizing, since he'd only played in one other tournament himself before.

The anticipation and cheer lasted right up until the first round of games started and, within a few hands, Hikaru realized that subconsciously he'd been expecting his opponents to be on a near level with Akira or Waya or Isumi... and everyone there were instead actually just random schoolkids. Maybe good competition for Kaga, but Hikaru had beaten Kaga (sort of) just to get him in the club...

Hikaru spent roughly the first ten minutes of the game trying to resign himself to the idea of spending the whole day playing boring Go and mentally blaming Tsutsui for acting so hyped that Hikaru had

bought into expecting a day full of fun challenges. Sai looked so polite and quiet without his normal laser focus that even he was obviously bored.

Stupid Tsutsui. Stupid Kaga, stupid tournament...

Hikaru placed a stone to lead into a ko attack, and then mentally paused. A ko attack was the obvious best move for his position. So what if he didn't do it? Could he get through the entire game without using ko attacks?

Sai leaned closer and closer over Hikaru's shoulder as the game progressed until he burst out with a cry of delighted discovery. Hikaru grinned even though no one else heard the reason.

The next game Hikaru picked arbitrary spaces to keep at all costs. An X reaching to all four corners seemed a little too ambitious, so he decided to build a fort in the middle of the board. Sai laughed as he had to go to ridiculous lengths to keep his opponent from breaking through the increasingly irregular fort wall without losing too much territory elsewhere.

The next game, his opponent seemed rattled before they even sat down to play. Sai observed the kid and board for only a few hands before he advised, "*Shidougo*."

Hikaru played a couple more hands before deciding it'd be a worthy challenge if he could manage to play a teaching game without the other kid ever realizing it, or at least not until after the game was done. He might or might not have managed it without Sai's occasional hmms, smiles, and fan twitches as not-actual-advice.

The game after that, Hikaru determined to end with exactly half the territory on the board plus one space. Kaga dragged him off to one side immediately during the break following that round to chew him out over it.

'You *lost* -you, you lost to that-'

Hikaru stifled the wish that he had a notebook on him so he could copy down some of the new vocabulary for later commitment to memory. Sai looked shocked at the insults Kaga came up with.

'... First board, if Tsutsui lost we...'

Hikaru shrugged when Kaga finally wound down enough to demand an explanation. 'Counting territory is hard.'

Then he went back to the next game, where he generously revised his calculations to win with half the territory plus five. Kaga kept giving him suspicious glares from the next chair over even though he played obviously better. Sai kept giving Kaga wary offended looks from as far a distance as possible.

"... And I almost got Kaga to bet he'd have to jump in a lake if I lost again, but he just said I'd throw a game, which got-uh, Tsutsui really upset and went on this whole rant about honor and Go and honestly I got lost on it pretty quick but man did he go on about it. I think me laughing gave him extra steam."

Akira thought Hikaru sounded inordinately cheerful while relating a slur to his character. But since Hikaru didn't seem to mind, Akira figured he had no reason to either.

"That was smart, thinking how to challenge yourself," he said instead. "When I played children, they cried or screamed when I won, so I learned to lose."

"What, really?" Hikaru's chair, which had been tipped back so Akira expected the front feet were no longer touching the floor, returned to a stable angle with a soft *thud*. "That sounds dumb, how little were they? Or you I guess."

Akira shrugged. "I don't remember. Father tells it. My grandmother took me to play while Father and Mother had gone. When Father came home he said no more children games." He thought briefly

about how to phrase it in English. "Play to same level, not same age."

"Geez, your dad must've been teaching you since you were a baby. Which is cool," Hikaru said hastily, and then straightened abruptly. "Ha- *ha* ! And that's the only time Kaga might've beaten you-I am so telling I know the real deal to that stupid boast next time he shows up!"

Akira still had no memory of this Kaga person, but Hikaru's scattered descriptions did not paint a reassuring image. "Do you see him much now?"

"Ah, he's been by a couple times. Bullies me into more weird challenges, I'm not sure as punishment since he figured out what I was doing in the tournament or just his sense of humor." Hikaru didn't seem bothered by either possibility. "You know he had me play him and Tsutsui and Akari all at once last time? And we don't even have three boards, just a little magnetic one and some graph paper."

Akira blinked. "Did you win?"

Hikaru waved one hand briefly. "Ongoing debate, we ran out of graph paper before Tsutsui's board. I probably did screw up there, but not like we can tell how much, and Tsutsui hasn't been paying much attention to anything except polishing the trophy. Stomped Kaga though."

Though he knew it was optimistic, Akira chose to take the evidence that Hikaru wasn't stressed over three simultaneous games-one of which sounded like it might have been blind Go-as a sign of his skill improving. "Do you have time to play now?"

"Sure, let's."

"And-" Akira almost hesitated, then said it anyway, riding on the ease of the conversation previous. "We can bet."

"Oh yeah?"

"If you lose, you take the next pro exam."

Akira fixed his gaze on the empty goban between them, but after a few seconds couldn't help glancing up to check Hikaru's reaction. He looked... considering.

Akira tried to squash a tendril of hope.

Did he want to be a pro? Hikaru wondered. He still wasn't sure. Akira and Waya and Isumi had all said he could make it, and getting paid to play did sound cool. It wasn't like there was really much else he was that interested in... but start a career now, already? It was more than a little daunting.

Then again... what was there to do instead if he said no? Get a job at McDonald's or someplace for a summer in a couple years, and only get to play in his free time. Work, school, that hardly left any time left over for Go. That sucked. What if he just went pro as a first job instead? If he sucked or lost interest he could always quit, surely. And in the meantime he'd be earning money and getting to play all the time.

"Hang on."

Hikaru turned away in his chair and dug out his cell phone, frowning in concentration to find the right contact.

"Hey Gramps." How to phrase it? 'Should I be pro?'

His grandfather cackled. 'You going to get better?'

"Huh?"

'You going to get better?' his grandfather repeated. 'Or you going to play like this forever?'

What, did he want to improve? 'I'll get better.'

'Good,' his grandfather said. 'Always get better, you'll be a good pro.'

Well. When he put it like that... why hadn't anyone put it like that before?

Hikaru was smiling when he turned around so Akira could see his face again. The hope escaped Akira's best efforts at containment.

"Okay. If I lose, I'll take the test." Then Hikaru's expression turned... a little alarming. " *But...* if you lose, you have to dye your hair."

Akira might have blanched. "What?"

Hikaru definitely looked evil. "Hey, it's a big bet. So, if you lose, you dye your whole head green. And you can't shave it off right after either."

Shaving his head was not an option that had even occurred to Akira to contemplate. He was still stuck on the mental image that came up as soon as Hikaru said "dye" and then "green."

"I..."

Green hair? He'd been fairly sure he might win again when he suggested the bet, but... surely Hikaru wouldn't really expect him to go through with that if he lost? Except Akira meant Hikaru to take the pro exam if he lost... but... *green hair...*

Akira took a deep breath. If it came to it, he could find a hat to wear until whenever the dye washed out. It was worth the promise of Hikaru going pro with him.

"I... okay."

"Awesome!"

Despite his resolve, Akira couldn't suppress a surge of relief when he won. Following that was a belated thrill.

And Hikaru still seemed cheerful despite his loss. "It was mercy," he claimed as they tidied the board. "Since you looked so *green* when I pulled ahead..."

"You didn't pull ahead." Akira could ignore the teasing, but that was absurd.

"I did like three times, especially after I got the upper corner-"

"That was because-"

The argument lasted all the way to McDonald's and through Akira's teriyaki burger and Hikaru's french fries and milkshake. By the time Akira headed home a silly little smile had stuck onto his face and he found he didn't feel like he'd wasted any of the day at all.

In which Jaro plays a pro

Stepping Stones

~ **34** ~ In which Jaro plays a pro

'Go on NetGo!'

"Muh?" Hikaru pulled his phone away from his ear muzzily to check the screen. No, Waya really was calling him, at the crack of dawn, on a *weekend*. "What?" he complained.

Waya said something, excited and fast. Hikaru was about to just hang up and go back to sleep when Waya repeated, 'Go on NetGo!'

'Fine, fine... why?' Hikaru grumbled, heaving himself up to shuffle down to the shed. Oh, no, his laptop was on his desk instead. Lucky.

Waya still talked too fast. Hikaru complained about it given how he was half asleep (thanks to Waya, by the way), and Waya complained about Hikaru talking in English.

'Okay. Now what?'

With surprising patience Waya directed him to the forums, then to a particular post. Hikaru stared at the lines of neat characters, contemplated the mental exertion necessary to run everything through the online translator and decode what it meant, and again almost hung up and went back to bed.

'So?'

Waya called him an idiot. Then he groaned and complained over Hikaru not reading Japanese. Then, finally, he broke it down into words Hikaru could understand.

A pro was challenging Jaro to a game. Only a mid-level pro, as Hikaru understood Waya's estimation, but still a pro. Waya was apparently stalking the thread to see if Jaro responded.

"Awesome!" Hikaru cheered, then hung up to go tell Sai the good news.

Sai literally squealed. Fortunately Hikaru had remembered to bring his laptop with him, as Sai pestered him nonstop while he was setting it up and connecting to the Internet to say yes to the player *now now now now* .

Now still took a while of hunting characters to copy and paste to phrase Sai's acceptance. Sai squealed again when Hikaru finally clicked Submit and whisked his fan around like a weird arms-only happy dance. Hikaru grinned in satisfaction at the screen, and then actually registered the time and date confirmed in the middle of Sai's words.

"Crap, Sai, I'm in school then!"

Sai paused his happy fan dance. He looked at Hikaru's face and uttered an apprehensive query.

"It... no, no, wait. We can still work this out. We..."

Hikaru flopped backward to stare at the ceiling, then slouched forward to stare at his knees, and even tried gripping fistfuls of his hair like he'd seen in some movies. The slumping and hair-gripping seemed to help a little.

"Okay," he worked out aloud, to himself since he couldn't think and translate to Japanese at the same time. "If I skip school Waya might find out and get suspicious again-no, I'll tell him it was so I could watch Jaro's game, I didn't want to wait. He'll believe that. Except even if I hide in the shed all day the school will probably call Mom, and she might tell Dad I skipped, and he'd probably take away my laptop..."

The risk wasn't worth it. Sai might actually die again of withdrawal if he couldn't play online Go for several solid days, plus Hikaru would get bored half out of his mind.

So he'd have Sai make a new comment rescheduling the game... except wasn't there, among all the speculation online about who Jaro was, at least one theory Jaro was a schoolkid because of the times he logged in? Obviously a stupid theory, but since it was also sort of the truth it'd be a really good thing if Sai could play this game during school hours, and make people drop that theory...

'Can you play...' Hikaru hesitated. If there was a term for it, he didn't know it. '... No board? Can you play him only in your head?'

Sai asked several clarifying questions, going from apprehensive to thoughtful and back to eager. He nodded firmly.

'Okay, good. Then...' Sai would have to come to school with Hikaru, since Hikaru was the only one who could hear him, and Hikaru could practice texting discreetly beforehand, and make sure Sai could read the texts... so they just needed a third person at a computer elsewhere to input Sai's moves and relay the opponent's to Hikaru's phone.

'Okay,' Hikaru repeated, pushing himself to his feet. 'Let's go visit Gramps.'

Gramps was perfectly willing to help. Gramps also didn't have a cell phone, and even after looking it up Hikaru couldn't come up with any way to text using a landline.

Which left only one other option, tricky as it would be... then again, Hikaru wasn't the one who'd come up with all those crazy conspiracy theories about who and where Jaro really was.

'Jaro has no Internet?' Waya looked at Hikaru like he disagreed with Hikaru's self-estimation of sanity.

'No computer,' Hikaru improvised. 'For now. But he wants to play now, not later, so he asked me to help, but I'm in school, so I ask you...'

Okay, so it did sound a *little* ridiculous when put that way.

'Okay.' But now Waya looked excited. 'So, you give me Jaro's number-'

"Oh *heck* no," Hikaru blurted, then corrected himself back to Japanese. 'No. Uh... Jaro is very... private. Very... secret? What word..."

Waya spared maybe three seconds to help Hikaru deduce some suitable Japanese word before waving it off impatiently.

'You text me, then I text Jaro, then back,' Hikaru insisted.

'I have to go on NetGo as Jaro,' Waya pointed out.

Hikaru made a mental note to change Sai's password immediately afterward. Actually, before and after, maybe a couple times each. That'd be extra secure right?

'Okay. I text you before game, you log in...' Hikaru eyed his friend with sudden misgiving. 'Don't use chat, okay? Don't say anything.'

Waya laughed. 'Yes, yes. I'll be ghost at screen for Jaro.' Hikaru tried not to twitch. 'Next time he visit you, let me meet him!'

Hikaru did twitch. Had he ever said Jaro came to visit? Why would he do that to himself? 'I'll ask,' he lied solemnly, and escaped as soon as possible.

Hikaru practiced texting under the table during meals, texting under his desk during homework, and even made a list of possible complaints to get himself sent to the nurse for a few hours if texting

in class didn't work out. Since Sai could participate when Hikaru was at his desk, they also practiced making sure Sai understood the placements represented by the numbers on the screen and Hikaru understood the numbers Sai told him to type.

When the day finally came Hikaru had to stop himself from jittering in his seat the second he sat down. Sai, annoyingly, sat straight and calm on the floor beside Hikaru's desk where he'd be able to see the phone screen easily when Hikaru brought it out and just looked around at everything in the classroom in fascination.

The teacher announced a math test. Sai left his ready position to peer over Hikaru's shoulder at the problems, murmuring as if working through some of them himself but fortunately quiet enough to ignore.

Hikaru's phone, with cotton balls taped over the tiny speaker to muffle the sound of vibration, buzzed silently in his pocket. Sai snapped to attention. Hikaru chewed on his pencil and made faces at the paper while getting the phone out.

The pro had won nigiri and placed his first move. Sai eagerly breathed in Hikaru's ear his counter. Then he went back to looking at the math test, which reminded Hikaru to do the same. Sai even helped out on a few problems when Hikaru was going wrong because he was focused on his phone.

Hikaru went through pretty much all of his morning classes and lunch focused on looking attentive while being subtle with his phone. If anything from today showed up on later tests he was probably screwed, even though he kept reminding himself to listen to the teacher and not try to track the game in his head.

Wayu's last text, instead of numbers for a move, contained characters. Hikaru concentrated on keeping a bland attentive expression aimed at the blackboard instead of scowling. Sai peered at the phone screen and made a pleased sound, but diffident enough

Hikaru suspected the ghost wasn't positive what the characters said either. Probably too modern.

Evidently Waya eventually realized the problem, because several minutes later he texted again, this time using romaji. *Game over. Jaro win.*

Hikaru stifled a whoop before it could escape, then had to clamp his jaw against a grin. Sai peered at his face, then gave vent to delight for him, which helped a lot except for making it impossible for him not to smile.

Smiling was okay though. Akari looked a little quizzical, but nobody called him out for randomly smiling in the middle of class.

The rest of school dragged. Hikaru escaped the second he could, not even dropping by the club room where he usually hung out with Akari and Tsutsui (and, occasionally now, Kaga), and he and Sai took the bus to Gramps'.

Gramps was happy to celebrate Sai's win with them. Hikaru navigated him to the kifu of Jaro's latest game on Gramps' clunky old desktop, and they had an impromptu language practice/postgame analysis party with weird-flavored chips and grape soda, which only Hikaru had any of.

'This is good pro?' Hikaru asked in the middle of it, after tracing one series of hands where Sai pretty much took the pro's hand, patted it gently, and then stomped all over the pro's advance. 'I thought he would be... better.'

Gramps laughed. 'Is good pro. Sai is better.' He glanced fondly at the spot Hikaru had indicated Sai settled.

Sai blushed and hid his face behind his fan. '*This was good game,*' he protested, carefully sounding out modern-ish Japanese while Hikaru carefully repeated formal-ish. The ghost looked wistfully at the computer screen. '*I have played better, but he did well.*'

Hikaru patted the air where Sai's shoulder was. "Ah, it's okay Sai." Gramps whapped right above Hikaru's head. Hikaru rolled his eyes as exaggeratedly as he could and switched back to Japanese. 'It's okay. Better opponents will come now soon.'

Gramps suggested an improvement for Hikaru's phrasing. Sai poked his fan at the chips, again, with the same lack of result. Hikaru opened a new tab to look for blog comments on the game since Gramps could read them aloud for Hikaru and Sai a lot faster than they could piece messages together switching back and forth with an online translator.

'Should Jaro challenge all pros again?' Hikaru suggested, riding high on Jaro's success.

Gramps roared with laughter. Then he made Hikaru show him the now-old post where Hikaru and Sai had done exactly that and laughed harder. Sai fluttered in distress at the idea that his request might have come across rudely. Hikaru protested it was a great idea and not their fault that pros were evidently snobs about NetGo.

'You go pro, you turn every pro upside down,' Gramps chortled, wiping his eyes. 'And you come tell me about every game.'

Sai brightened. *'Hikaru! You will play professionally?'*

'Pro?' Hikaru checked, using Gramps' term. 'Yeah. Try anyway.'

'Wonderful! I will help you! Show me young professionals' games? We will train you!'

Hikaru straightened. "Oh yeah! There's this-" Gramps whapped him. Hikaru scowled mightily at him, then kept scowling in thought as he figured out the words in Japanese. 'There is... game records room, in Go student building. We could study from?'

Sai looked rapturous. Hikaru took pleasure in whapping at him when his babble was unintelligible.

' *Good!*' Sai corrected himself, much less annoyed than Hikaru at having to translate himself. '*Good, very good! Many records? May we go soon?*'

Hikaru had actually meant he could copy some to take home, if there was a copy machine somewhere nearby, but it would be less work to just take Sai along instead. They could see about copying if someone came along and fussed at them for being in there. Or if they found lots of really good games they'd want to study later... yeah, he could work out a phrase to ask the receptionist about copy machines.

'Okay,' he agreed. 'Tomorrow?'

Sai cheered.

'Bring some here,' Gramps instructed. 'We do language study and Go study.'

"Deal," Hikaru agreed instantly. The combination sounded way better than just the first. Then Gramps whapped him again for the English.

In which Hikaru discovers Sai's legacy

Stepping Stones

~ **35** ~ In which Hikaru discovers Sai's legacy

"Well, that's it." Danielle flipped the last sheet of his homework over and tidied it back into a stack.

Hikaru hastily closed Missile Command. "What's it?"

"That's it for me. You're not giving me enough work to justify paying me anymore."

Hikaru blinked dumbly at her.

"I mean you're good. You've graduated from needing my services. I'm going to tell your parents you're alright to go on from here on your own. You okay with that?"

"But... but... my history test next week," Hikaru protested.

She waved her hand at his pile of homework. "But you don't need me for it. Look at the grades you've been averaging. No, seriously. Try the test next week on your own, without me helping you any." She grinned at him. "And if you get a good grade, I'll take you out for ice cream."

"Milkshake," Hikaru countered automatically.

"Deal." She rose to her feet. "I'll go let your mom know the plan."

She left his room. Voices passed muffled through the wall a moment later from the front of the house.

Hikaru scowled for a bit, pulled his history textbook over and flipped through a few pages. He scowled some more, just because it seemed deserved. Okay, so maybe he could read a little romaji, but that hardly made him capable of comprehending books like this! Sai had been reading-

Oh. Yeah. Nothing stopping Sai from still helping him. Sai helped more than Danielle by now anyway.

So when his mother called him into the living room to ask him if he was sure he was good with Danielle's proposal, he shrugged and nodded. Then after she said goodbye he took his history book along with his laptop to the shed.

The shed really wasn't as convenient as his room, though. He could just move the goban... but did he really want to sleep in the same room as a ghost?

Waya decided to celebrate Jaro's win against the mid-rank pro by visiting another Go convention with Hikaru and Isumi. He decided to inform Hikaru of this by showing up in front of his school as it let out on the day of the convention.

'Gah! Stop *being* places!' Hikaru complained, without much concern for sentence structure. 'Why not just call?'

'What? Faster. Let's go,' Waya shrugged, already turning to do so.

'Fine, fine, let me call Mo-' Wait. That wasn't the only call he needed to make. 'Bathroom,' he blurted, and hurried back toward the school building.

First he called his mother, just so he wouldn't forget, who said fine and call again if he thought he'd miss dinner. Then he called Gramps' house, hurrying as soon as he heard his grandfather's voice answer so Waya wouldn't have time to come look for him, "Hey Gramps. I'm gonna be late t-"

'What's this?' Gramps said loudly through the phone. 'I am deaf. Someone speaks but I cannot understand.'

Hikaru groaned, loud enough to carry over the speakers, and tried again in Japanese. 'Keep Sai late, I'm going-' What was the word for convention? Darn it, Waya had just said it...

'A monkey speaks!' his grandfather exclaimed. 'Mixes words together like stones in a pile.'

Hikaru tried to grind his teeth loud enough to be audible, but discovered that hurt so had to drop it. "Graaa-aaamps," he whined, just to be annoying back, then blew out his breath, thought hard and tried again. 'I will be late. Please keep Sai...' There should be another word there. '... Nice,' he finished, knowing it was wrong, and hung up before his gramps could start in on him again.

Then he crammed his phone into his backpack where he might not hear it if it rang and hurried to rejoin Waya.

The convention looked basically the same as the last one they'd gone to, though this time Hikaru was able to follow most of and even contribute to Waya's and Isumi's conversation. They just asked what he meant like normal people when he messed something up. Plus some attempted noogies from Waya for especially funny mistakes, according to Waya, which Hikaru attempted to argue as he dodged, which apparently was even funnier than the first mistake and so deserved more noogies. An official-looking person reproved them to settle down before a real chase could get started.

Hikaru told Isumi really, he'd learned to talk formally from his grandfather, were they seriously still talking about this, and asked about Isumi's latest game. Waya joked about how much more amazing he was going to be compared to Isumi after the next pro exam. Hikaru retorted Waya would have to beat *him*, and both other boys exclaimed disbelief and congratulations that Hikaru was taking the next pro exam too. Waya insisted it was somehow credit to him rather than a bet with Akira. Isumi laughed out loud when Hikaru

lamented not getting to see Akira with green hair. Waya proposed celebratory shenanigans after finding some snacks.

Another official politely suggested they quiet down or move along.

There seemed to be more to see at this convention than the last one, now that Hikaru was a little more familiar with the Go world outside of his computer screen. There were different kinds of gobans for sale, some tiny magnetic boards like Tsutsui's, some full-size wood but still meant to sit on a tabletop, and some like Sai's, big, heavy wood, designed to stand on the floor. Judging by the varying price tags, Sai's goban was probably expensive. Hikaru figured Sai's style must be the oldest, since the Japanese never seemed to have invented real tables until the West came along.

He almost bought a fan on impulse just because it resembled Sai's, to see how the ghost would react if he brought it home, and then he forgot all about it as he saw a fan that looked *exactly* like Sai's. In a painting.

Hikaru dodged everything in the way absently to get close to the canvas, staring the whole time. It was a big, detailed picture, showing two men sitting at an old-style goban half covered in stones. The closer man held the fan-it was Sai's fan, it was an exact copy. But Japanese people didn't paint like this as far ago as when Sai died, they did weird artsy styled screens and stuff. And wouldn't fan styles change-

'Ah,' Isumi said beside him. Hikaru vaguely noticed his presence. 'Honinbo Shusaku's...'

Hikaru blinked at the words that came next. "Wait, what? Ear? Red ear game?"

Isumi frowned, also switching to English. "Is... yes? Is story, in this game, Gennan-sama was winning-"

"Gennan?" Hikaru repeated.

Isumi gestured to the other painted man seated at the goban. "All thought Gennan-sama was winning, but his ears... turned? turned red, surprised, at Shusaku's move. Honinbo Shusaku won, against strongest player of time."

"Huh. So he was like a... early pro," Hikaru guessed, looking at the fan again. It really was Sai's fan.

"Was strongest player of time, until he die. Is Go... master now. Is thought as Go master," Isumi said. "One of best players in history. Was famous then too. Always played only on one board."

Hikaru paused, removing attention from the painted fan and rewinding Isumi's words in his head. "Always... like, what, *a*lways on only one board? The exact same board every single time? From the very beginning?"

Isumi nodded. "Thought lucky?" he judged.

"Yeah," Hikaru muttered vaguely. "What about that fan? Was the fan special?"

Isumi looked at it and shrugged. "Is fan. I think copied from one he carried. Also lucky?"

"Yeah," Hikaru repeated. "Look, I need to go make a c-no, actually, I gotta go. Um, I feel sick. Wait." He dug out his cell phone and snapped several pictures of the painting. "Sorry to run out on you guys, tell Waya when he gets back I'll see him around? We can do something else or something. Nice seeing you again. I just..."

He spent the entire time from stepping on the bus to getting off at Gramps' neighborhood staring at his tiny phone screen and the tinier details of the painting displayed. Even at the poor resolution the fan continued to look like Sai's. The game portrayed looked about half finished, and absolutely brilliant on both sides from what Hikaru could judge.

"Sai!" he shouted as soon he entered his grandparents' house, kicking off his shoes. "Why didn't you ev-"

'Talking monkey!' Gramps shouted back from the living room.

"You suck," Hikaru informed him as he entered, secure in being the only person present who understood English. But then he switched languages anyway. 'Sai! This-this game-' Dang it, what had Isumi called it? 'This... ear game-'

Sai looked bewildered. Gramps looked at the tiny square of picture on Hikaru's phone screen and humphed. Hikaru huffed and dragged them to Gramps' computer to look up a better copy.

"This!" he declared when he managed to find one. 'This game! Sai, is this you?'

Sai leaned closer, fan fluttering in interest. Then he made an exclamation of pleasure. *'I remember this game!'*

'Ahh, this,' Gramps commented, also leaning to look.

"Sai!" Hikaru exclaimed, barely remembering to keep to Japanese. 'You played this? This pro-this famous player-he was *you* ?'

' *Torajiro was wonderful boy,*' Sai reminisced. *'He let me play so many games - '*

" *Sai !*" Hikaru repeated. 'Isumi said this is *best player in history !* Why you never say?'

Sai's fan came up in front of his face, fluttering rapidly. *'Not best! Many good players,'* he protested, and kept protesting, but dropping back into formal Japanese. Hikaru was about to whap at him when his grandfather whapped him.

Rather than try to remember the exact exchange, Hikaru just informed Gramps that Sai was, evidently, so good he was still remembered in Go history as a master player. Gramps laughed loud

and long, though Hikaru wasn't clear on whether it was for Hikaru not knowing or Sai not saying.

'But... pros now... you *were* pro. Famous. You could beat them, yes?' Hikaru protested to the ghost.

Sai's fan snapped shut. *'I wish to know,'* he sighed.

Hikaru tried to remember the name for Akira's dad. 'Touya Meijin? You could beat him?'

Sai picked his words carefully. *'Touya Meijin is very good. I would... be great pleasure... to play him. The game would be wonderful, honored game.'*

"Right." Hikaru translated 'Maybe' for his gramps. But Hikaru still really didn't want to have to face down Akira's dad again with a strange request he couldn't explain properly without getting committed to a loony bin. Probably Akira's dad would love to play... whatever that name Isumi had used was... but Hikaru couldn't tell anyone that guy was really a ghost and still around.

He thought about workarounds. 'We could change...' What was the Japanese word for username. 'On NetGo, we could name you...' What was that name?

' *No, no,*' Sai protested, fan fluttering again. *'Is wonderful, to play again, even with magic box. We need no change. Torajiro did not play, you play well. One person cannot play two games.'*

Hikaru blinked, and bit his tongue on telling Gramps Sai needed more modern speech practice in front of him. Besides, it might still be half Hikaru sucking at understanding. "Um... oh-kay?"

Sai wasn't stupid enough to not see his message hadn't gotten through. *'No change?'* he finally urged, simplifying.

Hikaru shrugged. 'Okay.' Then he had to explain to Gramps that he and Sai had just, basically, said nothing.

'But, this person... he let you play, he saw you?' Hikaru wondered afterward, stumbling over words in his preoccupation with the puzzle.

Sai nodded brightly.

'Any others? Any more old Go masters really you?'

' *No. Only Torajiro,*' Sai sighed, wistfully.

'No. Why could he? Why him, why Gramps, why me? Why no one else? Why Gramps before, but not now?'

Gramps made a thoughtful noise. 'Ownership of board, maybe? Him, me, I pass on to you.'

'But no one else owned it?' Hikaru asked skeptically.

Sai frowned in distress around his fan. '*Perhaps... family? Descendants?*'

Hikaru checked with his grandfather to make sure he understood Sai's last term, then asked the ghost, 'You had kids?'

Sai blushed. The fan fluttered frantically. '*No, no, I... young wife, woman... I do not know, when I died, I... family of... my father, my... brothers? My children of brothers...*'

"Right," Hikaru said, losing interest in Sai's increasingly incoherent response. 'Sai says maybe family,' he translated for Gramps, who made another thoughtful noise.

'Perhaps,' Gramps agreed. 'Perhaps family, owner, love of Go? Is something. We may never know.'

Not knowing annoyed Hikaru. On the plus side, though, at least he did now know that Sai had only popped up and gotten famous in the

Go world once before.

The painting still dominated Hikaru's thoughts later that night, but turned in a different direction. It was actually kind of cool that there was a famous picture of Sai—even though it didn't really show Sai—from the last time he'd been up and played Go a lot. Sai was making kind of a similar splash on NetGo now. Not as big, sure, but that could change; *would* change, as long as Sai kept playing, seeing as he really was better than practically everybody.

It'd be really cool if there was another famous picture of Sai from this time. A picture of a great game on a computer screen really wouldn't be much of a picture, though, and Hikaru was way too crap at drawing to even think of trying to paint Sai himself. But there was the optional little picture available to go alongside the username Jaro...

Hikaru stayed up late working on his laptop, first making up a tiny Go grid in Paint to fit the size limit allowed by NetGo, then dotting it with tiny stones. It still wasn't easy, getting the pattern of black right to look like a profile of Sai's head, but that much art he could handle. He'd just keep fiddling until it looked right.

In which Hikaru plans his future

A/N: Just one little issue left for Hikaru...

Stepping Stones

~ 36 ~ In which Hikaru plans his future

Hikaru soon discovered that his friends were even more enthusiastic about his plan to take the next pro exam than he was. Akira wanted to play him every weekend now, calling it training together. Waya tried to get him to agree to start attending his Go sensei's study group thing again, which Hikaru struggled to explain refusing until he realized he'd inadvertently made his own study group, with Gramps and Sai. (He told Waya he had his own. He did not confirm it involved Jaro, or agree to let Waya join his.) So Waya took to showing up randomly after his school let out to take him off to a random Go salon to 'practice against more opponents.'

Hikaru enjoyed those trips, especially when he could cadge someone else into paying for him to get into the salon, although Sai reacted with dismay whenever Hikaru demonstrated what improvements those trips made to his Japanese vocabulary.

'It's natural, I'm yankee!' Hikaru told the ghost gleefully.

Sai protested while asking why Hikaru would ever use that word.

Hikaru grinned from ear to ear. 'Means American.'

Gramps humphed at his grandson. 'Means gangster.'

"Nope," Hikaru said, grinning wider. 'In English, means American.'

Gramps humphed harder and grumbled some more about of course there was a connection. Sai demanded Hikaru not use words like *that* regardless. Hikaru innocently asked if he meant this one, or that

one, or this one until Sai's fan flew up to cover his face and he started shrieking that he wouldn't play with Go with young hoodlums-"Yankees!"-and Hikaru started laughing too hard to keep going, and too hard to dodge Gramps' swats as he laid out exactly what kind of language was and wasn't allowed in his house.

Playing against Akira was useful, if frustrating given how often Hikaru came close to winning only to see some misstep or better hand wrench it away from him. It was also fun, once he got past the irritation of loss and into the shouting-and-pointing debates their postgame discussions usually devolved into.

Playing in other salons wasn't as useful since none of the opponents were as good as Akira or Sai, but Hikaru figured it was good not to sink into a rut from always playing only a few people. Plus he liked winning.

His mother didn't much like smelling smoke on his clothes when she did his laundry, but he solemnly swore up and down it was only because most salons didn't have any kind of smoking and nonsmoking partitions. A lot of other stores in Japan were the same way, so his mother agreed she believed him.

Tsutsui was initially horrified when he heard Hikaru's intention, and remained so until they managed to hash out his misconception that Hikaru planned to become an insei. Hikaru asked why on earth he'd want to and Tsutsui smiled and nodded a lot and made him swear he'd keep doing school Go tournaments right up until he turned pro.

Akari said 'Good luck' and asked if he'd continue with school after he passed the pro exam.

Hikaru hadn't conceived that quitting school was an actual option. Tsutsui willingly expounded on the subject for him: most pros young enough to be in school when they passed quit afterward, to better focus on their new duties and study of Go. Some quit school as insei, before they made pro, to have more time to improve their Go.

Hikaru made vague noises about what about future careers. Tsutsui scoffed. Go was their career. Other people went to high school, went to college, went to an office job. Go masters played Go, studied opponents, taught students, played Go.

And yes, really, got paid for all of that. Paid like a career, if the player was good enough-but Hikaru stopped listening at that. So he'd maybe get a job at McDonald's too. Paid to play Go, right off the bat, *instead of* having to spend hours on algebra, and history, and reading boring old poems and writing stupid characters...

Hikaru paid rather less attention to his schoolwork with such a weighty consideration on his mind, and came home with lower grades as a result. His mother made concerned noises about rehiring Danielle. Hikaru blinked at losing the time already repurposed to extra Go and immediately promised to do better on his own, really, just give him a little more time to adjust to the new situation. His mother raised a skeptical eyebrow but agreed.

Hikaru did better. Just to make absolutely sure of it, he brought Sai along to school to nudge him whenever he got distracted.

'Why?' his gramps asked, when Hikaru called to inform him he wouldn't be dropping Sai off on the way to school as usual.

'Language practice,' Hikaru said promptly. 'Let him hear modern Japanese, not on TV.'

Sai regarded the trip as a focused adventure. He had his mission, and was conscientious at fulfilling it so Hikaru wouldn't lose any newly-won time for Go. Really it wasn't that much different from homework, except with only occasional corrections or directions instead of a steady lecture on the ghost's assigned reading from Sai. But the ghost did indeed pay interested attention to all the students' chatter during breaks.

After classes, as a reward for Sai's help, Hikaru took him to visit the room where he and Akari and Tsutsui hung out. Hikaru gave Akari

possibly his best teaching game ever with Sai's advice in his ear, though he had to pay close attention to his phrasing, and went home feeling the day had been a great success all around.

So the next day they did it again.

Isumi showed up too sometimes on Waya's outings, and usually eclipsed the salon games entirely in Hikaru's memory by talking to him seriously about some or other aspect of the pro world on the way to or from the salon.

'When you become pro, you should expect to lose,' he said once.

Hikaru actually stopped walking in the face of the idea, because that was... new. 'Why?' he asked, without thought for whether it sounded cocky.

'Because... pros play better than other players,' Isumi explained. 'People you play now, in salons, don't play much. So, you're better, so you win. Pros... studied more than you, played more than you, may play better than you. So you lose. If you expect to win against pros like you win against salons, you may get frustrated. Discouraged. Hard to lose when you expect to win.'

Hikaru chewed over the thought. 'You lose?' Isumi was a good player. And he'd made pro, so that was like objective proof he was a good player.

Isumi chuckled. 'Yes. Not always, but...'

He explained about rankings in the Go world to Hikaru. Isumi, as a new pro, was only a one-dan, and so theoretically equal in skill to other new pros and not as good as higher dans. As he played and won more games, he could eventually progress all the way up to nine-dan, with the best professionals. He could also, conceivably, win one of the Go titles like Akira's dad, and be recognized as one of the best players in Japan.

Hikaru had the vague memory that he'd heard the titles before, but listened anyway as Isumi listed them. Until Isumi said "Honinbo."

'Ha! That's... red ear game? That picture? Was that Honinbo?'

'Honinbo Shusaku. One of first Honinbo,' Isumi agreed, and kept going since Hikaru didn't interrupt further.

Hikaru didn't pay much more attention though. So Honinbo was a title, that explained why Sai called the guy something else. Honinbo Shusaku Torajiro... no, Akira's dad had a title and went by Touya Meijin, so Torajiro should be Shusaku Honinbo. Right? Why was his backwards then? Or did Akira's dad prefer a backwards name for some reason? Stupid nonsensical Japanese language.

Isumi also gave Hikaru a more mature perspective on quitting school. Hikaru could do it, of course, although he should continue to work on speaking and reading Japanese-Hikaru made a face but agreed-since nothing taught in school was necessary for professional Go. But, Isumi cautioned, Hikaru should only take that step if he was fully committed to Go as a career, because professional-level skill in Go didn't qualify him for any other career.

Hikaru made thoughtful noises, and really thought about it. What Isumi said made sense. It wasn't like Hikaru had ever been interested in any other kind of job he'd ever heard of, though, so the only real problem he could think of was if he ever got tired of Go.

He considered asking Akira how long his dad had been playing, and if he'd ever gotten tired of it. Then he asked his own really old pro instead.

Sai stared at him as though he'd just asked what the moon tasted like, even though Hikaru had thought out the phrasing really nicely beforehand. '*Tire... of Go?*' the ghost finally repeated.

'Someday,' Hikaru explained. 'Since I couldn't get different job.'

Sai still looked bewildered. '*You might want to quit Go ?*'

In retrospect, maybe asking a ghost who seemed to have literally stuck around after death just to keep playing wasn't very useful. But Sai's continued presence did make a compelling argument for someone who definitely hadn't ever gotten tired of the game.

'How come you never went pro?' Hikaru asked his grandfather next time he visited.

Gramps shrugged. 'Not good enough. Not... passionate to become good enough.'

Hikaru chewed the insides of his cheeks meditatively. His gramps looked at him, laughed, and said, 'I play Go sometimes, I watch TV sometimes, I read, I walk, I play pachinko... when you have free time, you do what?'

"Go." Somehow it had just crowded out everything else he used to kill time with.

His grandfather laughed again and ruffled his hair. 'So, you be pro. Good pro.'

'I might lose,' Hikaru said, pleased at the estimation anyway.

'Of course! Always someone better. You lose, you learn, you win, you win more. But always lose sometime. Never be done.'

That was a good point. And quitting school would let Hikaru get better faster, so he wouldn't lose as much. And that would earn him more money, so he wouldn't have to lose time to working at McDonald's either... and improving his Japanese would come just with living in Japan, that wouldn't even take dedicated study. Well, after he and Sai hit the same talking wavelength. And maybe reading all those characters... okay, *some* study. But not as much as school now.

"So when is the next pro exam?" he asked Akira next time they were playing.

Akira brightened, and Hikaru got away with several good moves while Akira told him exactly when and where the next exam would be, and what would happen during it, and what they'd need to have ready beforehand, and what would happen afterward if (when) they both passed.

At some point it came up that Akira never ate lunch during breaks in the middle of games, and Hikaru got him into a spirited debate over of *course* they would eat during the pro exam matches, Hikaru could frogmarch him to the nearest Mickey D's or forcefeed him a hamburger with chopsticks, Akira's choice, and then just as Akira was building up a good head of steam to argue Hikaru whooped, accidentally knocked over his chair, and invented a spontaneous jig over winning.

Akira stared down at the goban with his jaw loose, accused Hikaru of cheating, and then demanded Hikaru sit down and stop making a scene. And by the way, talking during a game like that would *not* happen when he was a pro, so he'd better not expect any more cheap wins that had nothing to do with his ability or lack thereof.

Hikaru bought him a milkshake to make up for the loss and cheerfully found ways to work "I won" into every single sentence he said from the end of the game on. Akira pouted, and reiterated that would never happen that way again, and Hikaru grinned and agreed and suggested he bring a hamburger and chopsticks next time, his treat since he won.

"I take back my concern, Ru," his mother said over dinner that night. "You're making better grades than I honestly expected this soon."

"Eh? Uh," Hikaru agreed with his mouth full.

"I agree," his father said from across the table. "I admit I'm impressed, son. At this rate you could make it into a very good

college. You should start thinking about whether you prefer Tokyo University or-"

Hikaru reflected that he had, perhaps, never been so relieved to have already settled his career choice as at that moment. Which might have been why he said, "Oh, I won't even need to worry about high school, I'm gonna play Go instead."

The silence was remarkably loud.

"I beg your pardon?" his father said.

Hikaru automatically looked to his mother.

"You think you're *what* ?" she said.

Hikaru realized he'd forgotten to mention an important detail.
"Professionally. I'll get paid."

Strangely, the clarification didn't seem to help.

"Hikaru, just because you enjoy this game now-" his mother began.

"You are certainly not *leaving school* -" his father began.

Hikaru protested, but his arguments got lost in the crossfire.
"Everybody says I can pass!" drowned under "Think about your future realistically!" and "I *have* thought about it," was lost in "You don't even know what would that really entail, just because it sounds fun-"

At "You've had hobbies before, Hikaru-" Hikaru finally started shouting. "What *hobby* -"

But that still didn't help. He shouted louder, until his father started shouting back, and his mother shouted at both of them to stop yelling. The end result was Hikaru got sent to his room, without his laptop, or even Sai.

And a final edict laid down without appeal.

In which Touya Meijin steps in

Stepping Stones

~ 37 ~ In which Touya Meijin steps in

Akira started to smile when he looked up and saw Hikaru entering the salon a second day in a row, then forgot the smile as he saw Hikaru's face. He'd never seen his friend look quite that... upset before.

"Hikaru?" he asked tentatively as the blond-banged boy thumped down hard into the chair across from him.

"I can't take the pro exam," Hikaru growled.

"What?" Akira's brain seemed to have stopped processing properly. "But..."

"I'm not *allowed*," Hikaru fumed. "I told my parents I was thinking about skipping high school since I wasn't going to need it, and now they say I can't even take the stupid exam! They won't even let me *prove* I can do it!"

"But..." But Hikaru was going to take the next exam with him, and they were going to pass, and they were going to spend the rest of their lives playing better and better Go with each other, Akira and the only rival he'd ever found... that had to happen. This had to be fixed. But how?

"My life *sucks*," Hikaru sulked, arms crossed and shoulders hunched as he slouched in the chair. "I should just run away. Go back to America and turn professional there and come back with one of those stupid titles that'd show I was one of the *best players in the whole stupid country* -"

Akira blinked and leaned back discreetly from the other boy's wrath. "Ah, is that really good idea?"

Hikaru's face screwed up further, and then he slumped and sighed. "I hate the world. You wanna play?"

They tried playing. Hikaru kept bursting into more outrage and Akira could barely keep a five-move plan in his head in company with the thought that Hikaru wouldn't go pro. It would be such a horrible waste for Hikaru to do anything *but* Go... there had to be a way to fix this...

Finally at some point in midgame they both looked down at the board, registered their terrible playing, and looked up with mutual resignation.

"I will help," Akira said, helplessly.

"I can move in with you?" Hikaru grumbled, probably joking. "I should go. Tell everybody else who'll need a chance to vent."

"Your... teacher?" Akira asked, careful not to say grandfather.

Hikaru, strangely, shuddered. "You kidding, he's gonna take *weeks* to calm down. Or years. As long as until I hit legal adult and can go pro anyway, probably." He sighed. "See you later."

Hikaru left. Akira slowly cleared away their unfinished game, once again wrapped up in the problem of how to let Hikaru turn pro after all. He still hadn't solved it by dinner, where his parents noticed his preoccupation and inquired what was wrong.

Akira told them, glad to get other perspectives since he'd made no progress himself.

His mother made a thoughtful sound when he finished, and asked, 'Your friend's parents don't know much of Go?'

'I suppose not?' Akira guessed. He could ask Hikaru next time he saw him.

'And he's not an insei? Perhaps that could be an intermediary step, to show his parents he could succeed,' his mother suggested.

'He doesn't need to be, though,' Akira confessed. 'I suppose it might help him improve some...'

'Well, it couldn't hurt to suggest.'

That seemed reasonable, although Akira was hesitant to suggest anything that only might work when Hikaru seemed so volatile.

'Your friend is, truly, very good?' his father spoke up.

'He beat me once,' Akira said, truthfully, even if the circumstances had been a little... but Hikaru *had* beaten him, and it was Akira's own fault for not noticing it happen. 'And we always play even.'

'He must have a teacher, surely?' his father asked. 'Why does his teacher not present his case for him?'

For a moment the words weighed on Akira's tongue, that Hikaru's teacher might be his grandfather... but Hikaru had asked him not to tell. And he had no idea why, if that was true, Hikaru's grandfather wouldn't have already helped persuade his parents.

He thought about what he did know-or, rather, what he remembered Hikaru actually telling him-and came up with, 'He said once he learned to play online...'

'Hmm,' his father said. 'Ask him to play a game with me. I will make time when he can.'

" *What ?*"

"My father wants to play you," Akira repeated.

Hikaru tried to hide the faint terror induced by that sentence. "Uh... on NetGo?"

Akira looked dubious. "Father never played online..."

Dang, there went Sai's chance at a game.

"Um... uh, why? I mean... your dad's really, really good, right? What with having that title and all. Why'd he want to play me?"

"Yes, Father is good," Akira agreed. "You can play... put down two stones, to start, like I do to play him."

"Wait, put down two stones? What does-like a teaching game? Shidougo?" That made Hikaru feel a lot better about the idea, although he still wasn't sure why Akira's dad would suddenly want to play him.

"Well..." Akira hesitated, but Hikaru wasn't paying attention anymore.

"Okay, I guess. I can be online at-oh, wait, you said no, then... here, I guess?" There was no reason to be nervous about the idea of facing down Touya Meijin across a goban, he did it all the time with the person-ghost-who'd really been Honinbo Shusaku and Touya Meijin would probably faint or something if he ever actually got to meet Honinbo Shusaku so Hikaru was going to be *fine*. And playing Akira's dad. He'd be fine.

"Okay," Akira agreed. "I will tell him."

Hikaru swallowed. "Great."

Hikaru regretted telling Sai about Hikaru's upcoming match with Akira's dad almost as soon as he said it, because for just a moment Sai's face and Sai's fan went perfectly still. And then he replied enthusiastically and threw himself into preparing Hikaru to face such an esteemed opponent.

And he never, not once, said anything about playing Touya Meijin himself, which just made Hikaru feel worse about getting to do it. Hikaru almost told him Akira said his dad never played online, then decided that was too cruel, then almost told him again just to explain that he *had* thought of Sai when this came up, then bit it back again because maybe someday Touya Meijin would change his mind...

The thought inevitably intruded that Hikaru could ask Akira's dad to play Jaro, but he squirmed away from it every time it came up. Maybe if Touya Meijin brought up Hikaru's teacher first, but otherwise... talking to Akira's dad at all was already intimidating enough. Sai helped drill him on formal speech too, though, and Hikaru practiced diligently instead of complaining. He would have concentrated more on speech practice than Go, but Sai insisted he present his best on both fronts even though it was just a teaching game. Hikaru was too guilty and grateful for Sai's help to argue.

He gave serious consideration-without mentioning it-to bringing Sai with him to the game, just for emergency vocabulary assistance, but finally decided against it. It would probably be worse for Sai to watch a game against the person he wanted to play most rather than just to go over it afterward.

So, when the next weekend came, Hikaru told Sai he'd be back after, took a deep breath as he boarded the bus, and practiced impromptu deep breathing exercises all the way to Akira's salon.

Touya Meijin was already there, in the back room where Hikaru and his friends had gotten the neighborhood gang and insei to play together. Hikaru resolutely shoved aside the memory of the gang badgering him to set up another game, and bit his tongue against begging Akira to sit in with them in case Hikaru mangled language.

Akira went in with him anyway. Hikaru resolved that Akira was now his best friend for eternity, bowed to and greeted Touya Meijin like Sai had taught him, and sat down across the board from him. And breathed.

"Put down two stones," Akira prompted him in an undertone.

Hikaru quickly moved to do so, then hesitated. Sai didn't give head starts for teaching games, but he shouldn't waste the opportunity by hurrying.

He took a deep breath, told himself Sai was the one he was playing as long as he looked at the board instead of his opponent, and placed his first stones.

Touya Meijin didn't say anything during teaching games, also unlike Sai, but the quiet helped Hikaru stay focused on playing the best game he could. Touya Meijin didn't show any more mercy than Sai did, but he also didn't squash Hikaru like a bug right from the start like Hikaru suspected he could. The extra two stones gave him a fighting chance to start on, even though his opponent immediately and steadily ate that advantage away.

When the game ended, rather than immediately begin going over weak moves like Sai did, Touya Meijin said, 'What would you now do differently?'

Hikaru blinked. 'Well...' He started to point, then moved to an earlier hand. 'Here, I should have moved it one space up...'

'Why?' Touya Meijin asked.

Hikaru explained, still breathing, figuring out what he wanted to say and then the words to say it, Akira seated nearby available to help but not volunteering.

Touya Meijin nodded when Hikaru finished. Then he indicated a different grouping and said, 'Would you play differently here?'

Hikaru looked, considered, and ran mental translations before he answered, head full of Sai's vocabulary and instructions on phrasing. Getting it right was more important than getting it out fast, in the face of such an imposing ghostly-except-still-alive figure as Touya Meijin.

'You play very well,' Touya Meijin said at the end of the postgame discussion. 'You wish to play Go professionally?'

It was either abandon everything now or stick to it come hell or high water. Hikaru nodded.

'Akira says your parents do not approve?'

Hikaru scowled, stifled it, and muttered, 'Yes sir.'

'Are you forbidden to attend professional games?'

Hikaru blinked. 'Uh... no?'

'If you have time next weekend, then, there is one scheduled you might find instructive. I can escort you to it.'

'Um... sure?'

'Where do you live.'

Hikaru looked at Akira, but Akira hadn't turned blue or spiky or anything, so maybe this hadn't turned into a dream. So Hikaru recited his address, vaguely waiting for an anvil to fall or his clothes to turn into pajamas.

'Then I will meet you there Saturday morning at ten. If that is acceptable?'

'Sure?' Hikaru repeated.

Hikaru spent the ride home debating whether or not to tell Sai that there was, possibly, unless Hikaru was hallucinating, a chance that Touya Meijin was going to show up at their house next weekend. He wasn't sure whether the ghost was more likely to faint, go hysterical, or camp out at the front door every single day until Touya Meijin appeared. Or maybe he'd be reasonable. There was a chance he'd be reasonable, right?

What Sai did was go very, very still, while Hikaru braced himself for whatever came next. But Sai only asked, 'Why?'

"Um..." Because he liked to indulge in lunacy? But Hikaru just related the strange conversation as accurately as he could manage.

Sai listened with rapt attention, though he didn't offer any insights either. Hikaru was surprised to notice, when he finished, that the ghost didn't immediately start begging to come along.

Well, why shouldn't he? It shouldn't involve Hikaru playing while Sai didn't get to, and there might be more talking, so having Sai along would be handy. Hikaru could just keep his mouth shut most of the time unless he was sure of what kind of vocabulary he was using.

'Want to come?' he asked, and finally the dam burst.

' YES!' Sai squealed, clouding Hikaru's vision with an intangible hug, then whirling around in a crazy fan dance. *'To see professionals today play, to watch a great game...'*

He kept going, at length, though he rapidly went incomprehensible due partly to formality and mostly to rate of speech.

"You lost me," Hikaru said mildly, with a grin. Sai didn't even notice. Hikaru eventually calmed him down only by dragging out the goban and setting up to recreate his game with Touya Meijin.

Akira's dad did, indeed, appear on Hikaru's doorstep the following Saturday at ten in the morning. Hikaru rushed to let him in, stumbling over an appropriate greeting with Sai invisibly hissing the words in his ear through a fan and trying to explain to his parents why they had a visitor.

'Nice to meet you,' Hikaru's mother said, still in smoother Japanese than he was managing at the moment, then demanded in an

undertone while Hikaru's father came forward, "Ru, why didn't you say you were expecting someone-"

Because telling them and then having Touya Meijin not show up would have been much, much worse than a little confusion now. "He's my friend Akira's dad-" Hikaru said brightly, while Hikaru's father finished introducing himself and Touya Meijin finished bowing politely and explained, in his unhurried, formal Japanese, that he was here to take Hikaru to watch a Go game. Hikaru was sure his father could understand it, though he didn't know about his mother.

'It is good experience, for the young to watch their elders play,' Touya Meijin said. Sai nodded like a bobblehead at Hikaru's shoulder.

'I... see,' Hikaru's father hesitated. 'But...' He turned to Hikaru. 'You wish to do this? Spend your weekend this way?'

" *Duh* ." Hikaru couldn't help himself, despite the distracting weirdness of hearing Japanese at home. 'I mean, yes. Sounds fun.'

'Hikaru is very promising player,' Touya Meijin remarked. 'Understands skill is more dedication than talent.'

Sai glowed with approval. Hikaru's parents looked a little lost. Hikaru told them goodbye, pulled on his jacket over jeans pockets already filled with Sai's stones, and got out the door with ghost and pro in relatively short order.

Fortunately, Touya Meijin didn't show much interest in small talk as they headed to their destination, which let Hikaru relax enough to eventually let go of the dread he'd built for it.

The setup for the game appeared to be the same as for Isumi's first game as a pro, except without Isumi playing or Waya to talk to while watching. Instead there were just some adults who all seemed familiar with each other (and surprised to see Touya Meijin) and curious about Hikaru, and two strangers-pros, hadn't Touya Meijin said?-starting a game. Hikaru nodded, smiled, and kept his mouth

shut unless Touya Meijin said something to him directly. Hikaru and Sai both paid close attention to everything they could understand in the Japanese-conducted discussion.

It was a good game, although Hikaru found it hard to keep his attention on following it constantly when there was so much vocabulary to distract him in the pauses between moves. And it was good Japanese practice to listen to several people talk about one right-there-to-reference Go game without Hikaru having to talk much. It wasn't boring, or unpleasant, or even uninteresting.

But it seemed... unnecessary. He'd get the same benefit studying a game with Gramps, or practicing his Japanese with Waya or Akira.

Then Sai wriggled in Hikaru's peripheral vision and praised whatever move had just been made, and Hikaru refocused his attention to figure out what was special about it, and grinned in satisfaction when he got it just as one of the other people pointed out that hand's effect too.

Sai made several good points during the discussion over the game, points that nobody else made, but each time Hikaru bit his lip and said nothing. Speaking for Sai in front of his friends had been bad enough; he'd rather play mute than do it in front of Touya Meijin. Especially since Sai generally had better insights to the game than Hikaru did. He didn't want Akira's dad to think Hikaru was as good as Sai.

Sai chattered and sighed with pleasure all the way home after the outing ended, even though he hadn't really been able to contribute to the conversation, and Hikaru agreed when Touya Meijin suggested doing it again. He didn't want to say no to the old man, and it had hardly been a bad experience.

A couple weeks later, as promised, (though Hikaru still hadn't quite believed it would happen) Touya Meijin showed up at his door again. Again he chatted mildly with Hikaru's parents about Go while Hikaru stuffed his shoes on.

Except not about Go-about *Hikaru playing Go* . Hikaru realized when he heard the comment, 'If he continues to play, he may someday earn a title.'

' *Of course!*' Sai agreed, but Hikaru swung to look at his parents, who still mostly looked polite and uncomprehending.

They were missing an important fact, Hikaru realized, even though Akira's dad had introduced himself with his title last time. So, while Hikaru's father made vague positive noises, he pulled his mother back a step and demanded in an undertone, "Mom, look him up after we go, okay? T-o-u-y-a M-e-i-j-i-n. See who he is!"

Then he was out the door again, trying hard not to hope but doing it anyway. Surely, *surely* that kind of praise from a pro like the Meijin would get through to them. Once they realized how impressive Akira's dad was, and how good that must mean Hikaru was, they'd *have* to change their minds.

And he'd keep going out with Touya Meijin until they did. He'd bring Akira and his dad to dinner every day if it made a difference!

Much, much later, in the middle of the night, it belatedly occurred to him that *holy cow, one of the titleholders of Japan said I could equal him someday!*

He went back to sleep after that with deep satisfaction.

In which Hikaru discovers Go publication

A/N: So I'm clueless about canon timelines by now. No idea if Ogata should be Jyudan already, but in this story anyway, he's not quite yet. It isn't really an important detail anyway.

Stepping Stones

~ **38** ~ In which Hikaru discovers Go publications

'Sai need so much practice,' Gramps grumbled after another school day in which Sai had accompanied Hikaru rather than go to Gramps'. Sai was an unbeatable ace for history tests. Gramps fixed Hikaru with a stern look. 'Sure he only study language? Not your schoolwork?'

'No!' Hikaru said indignantly, before turning over his grandfather's phrasing in his head. 'I mean, yes no. I mean-gah!' He thwacked the newest kifu printouts onto the table in front of him instead of resorting to English.

Sai nodded approval at him for his self-restraint and settled down on one side of the table, focus turning to the kifu. Hikaru spread out the papers-three copies of each game, for everyone's convenience-and Gramps set out the goban and go ke so they could recreate hands or whole games as they wanted to. The topic of school fortunately ended.

Until later that evening, when Hikaru looked at Sai leaned over his desk beside him reading through his share of Hikaru's homework, and actually gave real thought to Gramps' question for the first time. Of course Hikaru didn't cheat at school, he never had.

But...

"Sai," he asked slowly, 'Are we cheating?'

Sai looked up with puzzlement and concern. *'Cheat? Cheat at what?'*

'Well... in school, when you tell me answers.'

Somehow, stated so baldly, Hikaru found it difficult to hear that as anything but cheating. Which really wasn't a pleasant feeling.

Sai's fan came up, whirring anxiously. *'I should not? I am sorry, Hikaru, I did not know... I will keep silent...'*

'No, no, it's okay, I...' Hikaru found himself stuck on how to explain why Sai wasn't supposed to do exactly what Hikaru had asked him to do. 'We...' Darn. 'You can still come, still listen... listening helps, right?'

' Yes... is interesting, when the children talk. Is better to study children's speech than teacher's, yes?'

"Yeah," Hikaru agreed, because sure he was learning Japanese from his schoolteachers but he was really learning it from his friends. But Sai's fan hadn't slowed down much, why-oh. 'But... teacher is good to study too, I will-' No, Hikaru couldn't pay attention to how the teacher talked because he was always concentrating on what the teacher was talking about.

Which meant, without helping with schoolwork, Sai had nothing to do at school except during the breaks when students could actually talk.

'Well... you can still read,' Hikaru worked out as he went, 'and think. Good practice there too, yes? Just not tell me answers.'

' Yes,' Sai agreed, and then looked at the desk. *'And here? There is no teacher here, there is no cheating, yes?'*

"Uh..." What kind of logic did that possibly make for an intrinsically honest ghost. Surely he didn't mean it wasn't cheating if they didn't get caught-Sai was a ghost, they *couldn't* get caught. 'This... homework...' Darn it, this was probably technically cheating too...

'Homework?' Sai repeated curiously. *'What is homework?'*

'Well... this.' Hikaru looked at the semi-organized mess in front of them and chewed his lip. 'Is... more to study, at home.'

'Ah.' Sai's fan picked up to a satisfied buzz. *'Help to study is not cheating, is good. Need more teachers, though-too much study alone. For what purpose?'*

Hikaru suppressed a grin. Put that way... 'I don't know. I guess, yes, too much to study, not enough teachers.'

Sai made a tsking sound. Then his fan slowed a bit. *'Why so many children study so much, Hikaru? Are they all to be - '* Hikaru didn't recognize the next term. *'Is that why your father says no to Go?'*

Great. Evidently that was an important word Sai hadn't picked up a modern equivalent for. Or maybe Hikaru hadn't. 'So many study because... all children study,' he shrugged. 'Until they work.'

'But you can work!' Sai protested, fan whirring again. *'You can be professional, soon, without all this - '*

"Tell me about it," Hikaru muttered, then sighed when Sai looked askance at the English. 'I know. I agree. Father is stupid.'

'What does your father wish you to do? Something important?'

'Office, I guess,' Hikaru said without needing to think about it. 'Do... numbers, meetings, make money, work all day forever.'

'But... a brother... one of the other children. One boy said his father is shop owner. Your father could train that boy, make him heir - you should play Go, Hikaru, you bring honor for your father when you play!'

Sai sounded distressed, though Hikaru was having trouble following whatever archaic thought process he was expounding. And wondering just how well Sai had understood him.

'Heir?' he repeated, making sure he heard it right, though Sai probably couldn't explain exactly what the term meant or he wouldn't have used it. 'Not heir, just job. Father wants...' Hikaru scowled, then sighed. 'Thinks Go is just game. Thinks I...' Would Sai understand the distinction if Hikaru said just playing? 'He doesn't understand,' Hikaru settled for.

Sai made another distressed sound, fan coming up in front of his face. *'If we could show him...'*

Hikaru snorted. 'Maybe Touya Meijin make him listen, not us. Come on. More homework, then NetGo.'

' So much more time without homework,' Sai mourned softly, but they both got back to work.

The next time Hikaru and Sai went out with Touya Meijin, the pro mentioned he would be playing a game in Osaka at the end of the month, and would Hikaru like to come.

If it were Waya or Akira asking, Hikaru's answer would have been "Sure, why not" and let the trip work itself out as they went. Since it wasn't them, Hikaru thought carefully for a few minutes while Sai held his breath.

When he got home, he asked his mother if he could go. Her eyebrows climbed toward her hairline.

"And how far exactly is Osaka from here?"

Hikaru told her. Then he told her which train he and Touya Meijin would have to take, when they'd have to leave and where from, how much it would cost, and when they ought to get back. At Sai's prompt he also remembered to tell her where Touya Meijin's game was going to be held and offer to get a phone number for it if she wanted.

Hikaru's mother listened, her eyebrows never coming down, until he finished.

"That's a very long day trip..." she finally said.

"I can handle it! Touya Meijin is gonna handle it and he's like eighty," Hikaru protested. "Or at least fifty. And I can catch up any sleep I miss Sunday. And I'll be really quiet and polite and do what I'm told the whole time, I'll bring some books or something to entertain myself on the train. And I'll eat whatever he wants to even if I don't know what it is. Or take food."

"And you've got that much saved up? Is that for one way or round trip?"

Hikaru bit his lip and shifted to one foot. "I was thinking, maybe, if I get all my homework for the weekend done, say, the day before, that might be worth a little... fiscal motivation?"

"I think you mean pecuniary." She smiled, then looked at him with faint doubt. "You can really get all your homework for the weekend finished on Friday?"

"I'll work on it before I do anything else every day until it's done." With Sai's help. Hikaru was interested in getting to see these pro games, but Sai sometimes acted kind of starved for them. Hikaru just hoped his parents wouldn't broker getting his homework done that ridiculously early forever into any deal they made.

"Your father and I will discuss it," his mother promised, and then paused. "Let's see how long it takes you to finish the homework you have now."

Hikaru suppressed a glance at Sai, swallowed a wince, mumbled "Yay," and trudged off to his room to get started. It sucked, but they'd have to do it eventually anyway.

Hikaru and Sai got his homework finished. Hikaru's father read it over. Both his mother and father talked with Touya Meijin next time he came to take Hikaru to a regular in-town game.

Hikaru had to have all his homework done beforehand, pay half his ticket himself, swear to stay with Touya Meijin the whole time no matter what, call home when he got to Osaka, and when he left it, and if anything unexpected came up to delay the train home, but his parents said yes.

"Shindo!"

Hikaru held off protesting about Waya invading his school gate again out of curiosity since the older boy was practically crowing. And holding what looked like a magazine.

'What?' he demanded as he got close enough through the departing crowd to talk. Waya brandished the magazine under his nose. Hikaru waved an absent goodbye to Akari as he tried to puzzle out meaning from the characters making up the article the magazine was opened to.

'Told you would happen! Talk about Jaro!'

"Seriously? Awesome!" Hikaru made a grab for the magazine, but Waya jerked it up out of his reach. "Waa-yaaaa..."

'Can't read it, stupid,' Waya laughed. 'Come on. We get ramen, I tell you what it says.'

'Deal.'

Waya read out in between bites the interview between the reporter and a pro who had evidently recently played Jaro and lost. Hikaru listened with one ear while studying the kifu printed alongside the article, because it was definitely one of Sai's games, and one of his

better ones, but it wasn't the one against that midrank pro who never showed up again. It was from... last week? The week before?

'This is pro?' Hikaru asked when Waya finished. 'But he play Jaro before. This is second game from him, at least. Maybe third.'

Waya stared at him for a second. 'Lose again?'

Hikaru made a rare decision to use tact and went with 'Yes' instead of "Duh."

He might not have needed to bother, though, because Waya just started hooting with laughter. 'Mighty Ogata, beaten on Internet! Lots of attention for Jaro now!'

'Oh good,' Hikaru mumbled, barely suppressing 'Oh no.' 'Who is Ogata?'

'Shindo! Learn things! Ogata is next Ten-dan.'

'Ten dan? Isumi said rank only go to-'

Waya waved off Hikaru's protest. 'Means Jyudan. Everyone say Ogata win Jyudan from Touya Meijin next tournament.'

"Touya Meijin?" Hikaru repeated. He thought Jyudan was one of the Go titles, but- 'But... Touya Meijin is Meijin?'

Waya laughed. 'Touya Meijin is Meijin, Jyudan, Oza, Tengen and Gosei now. Say Touya Meijin because Meijin biggest title.'

"Holy cow ." Just when Hikaru thought Akira's dad couldn't get more impressive. He'd have to mention that to his parents if they hadn't found out yet.

... How much money was it possible to make holding *five* titles at once? Was there a polite way to slip that into a conversation with Touya Meijin and his parents?

When they separated, Hikaru wheedled the magazine off Waya in exchange for enough yen to make up its price, and carried it home with the intent to have a long study session-or several-with Sai on Japanese characters. What kind of magazine ran articles about Go?

The magazine, it turned out, was entirely about Go, and not just for that issue. It was even called Go Weekly. Hikaru and Sai spent several evenings after homework was done poring over page after page to decode information about pros, games, events, products and news, even to the exclusion of actually playing Go themselves. Then they went to Gramps to get him to subscribe since Hikaru didn't have a bank account, on promise of Hikaru paying Gramps back out of his allowance every time a new issue came out.

Hikaru traded a stack of old manga he hardly read anymore to Waya in exchange for all Waya's back issues, and set up the start of his new collection on the newly cleared shelf. Sai's goban somehow never made it back to the shed much after that, with all their reading material, homework and laptop already concentrated in one room.

(Except for neighborhood gang lessons, because one try meeting in his room was enough to convince Hikaru to never give those little hooligans free access to his house again.)

In which Hikaru visits a new city

A/N: A few people have wondered why Akira doesn't come along on these trips. I figure Touya Meijin's been a professional player for Akira's entire life, so Akira's had the opportunity to study important games, meet a bunch of pros visiting his house, and attend significant games with his father whenever he was interested since he was very young. By this point it's old hat for Akira and he's more comfortable staying home doing his own stuff and getting most of the experience anyway.

In contrast, pretty much everything about professional Go is still brand new to Hikaru, and he's got an extra layer of isolation from it because he's still learning all the players' native language. Touya Meijin is taking Hikaru to fairly ordinary games just to familiarize him with the people and the process around the games, to get the experience he's missed from (as far as Touya Meijin knows) only having an Internet teacher.

Stepping Stones

~ 39 ~ In which Hikaru visits a new city

Hikaru loaded his backpack carefully the night before the trip to Osaka: a bunch of Go Weekly to puzzle through with Sai, a few manga as fallback, and his translation dictionary in case of emergency. Plus his cell phone, fully charged, and a couple of sandwiches and bottles of water. He'd intended to bring an entire potful of Sai's stones too, since to Hikaru's knowledge the ghost had never traveled so far from the goban before, but the backpack wound up too full and heavy for that, so he just set out enough stones to load both his pants and jacket pockets instead.

Honestly the only thing that daunted Hikaru about the prospect of a four-hour train trip each way to a new city was the fact that he was

taking it with Touya Meijin rather than some of his friends. Sai was no help about that; when he tried to recruit Sai to come up with emergency conversation topics Sai just looked at him with a puzzled expression and asked, *'Talk about Go, yes?'*

'Yes,' Hikaru grumbled. 'But... can't *always* talk about Go...'

Sai's expression was earnestly trying to understand but entirely failing to even though he could comprehend the words. Hikaru gave up. He comforted himself with the reminder that Touya Meijin wasn't very chatty anyway.

Sai didn't give up though. *'What is wrong, Hikaru? Not want to talk to Touya Meijin?'*

'No, no,' Hikaru said automatically. 'I... just... he hard to talk to.'

' *Why?*'

'Because...' Because. 'He... really good, and-'

' *Hikaru!*' Sai looked surprisingly fierce. *'He play Go. You play Go. He play more, but you are not less. He is good player, he not look down on you. You play Go.'*

You play Go, that was an equalizing mantra Hikaru hadn't heard before. Still... it sounded kind of good.

'Okay,' Hikaru agreed slowly. 'But... I talk bad-'

' *But you try, Hikaru. Sometimes,*' Sai qualified with a brief frown, which Hikaru failed to suppress a brief not entirely guilty grin at, which Sai whapped once at his head for with a return smile. *'You not born Japanese, but you learn. Is good. Touya Meijin understand you learn. And I help.'*

Sai looked so anxious and eager to help that Hikaru felt obligated to give up worrying so as to cheer him up.

'Okay,' he agreed, and added one more Go Weekly to his bag. Then his mother called that he really ought to go to bed since he had to get up so early, so he switched off his light, snuggled his cover up to his chin, and stared at the moonlit shadows on his ceiling until his alarm went off and it turned out he must have fallen asleep at some point because that woke him up.

His mother also got up despite the early hour to make sure he had breakfast and escort him to the train station, even though Hikaru had been running around navigating trains and buses just fine on his own pretty much from the first week they got to Japan. He suffered having his forehead kissed goodbye, met up with Touya Meijin to board, and napped most of the way to Osaka. When he roused he joined Sai in watching all the country go by, looking for all the differences to normal country back in America.

Or televised country in America, anyway, as he'd lived in a city there too.

Seeing a strange place turned out to be surprisingly fun when he could just enjoy the strangeness because he was only visiting, no need to worry about how to fit in or where he belonged.

In Osaka was pretty much business as usual as Hikaru had come to expect accompanying Touya Meijin, except that Touya Meijin didn't stay in the game-observing room this time but instead, after chatting for a few minutes with the people there, went on to the game-playing room.

Without Touya Meijin's continuing presence in the game-observing room, Hikaru found a lot more interest directed at him and no visible handy barrier to put between himself and everyone else. He caught a discreet-ish reference to 'Touya Meijin's shadow', and so guessed at least one of the people present had been at a game with him and Touya Meijin before.

There was nothing for it. Hikaru bowed, a little bit, feeling awkward about it, and rattled off the introductory and I'm-American-still-

learning phrases his tutor had drilled into his head eons ago. Sai muttered encouragement in time with his whisking fan.

'American?' one of the men repeated with polite interest.

Hikaru nodded, focused on the friendly face, and decided if he had to talk anyway he might as well be upfront about it. 'Talking monkey,' he agreed. Pretend to be cheerful until he was cheerful and it would happen. Sai murmured fond exasperation.

The man chuckled. Hikaru focused on the one or two people that maybe looked familiar from other games with Touya Meijin and seemed interested in chatting and pretended the rest of the universe didn't exist. Except the game starting. The men didn't stop talking when it started, but they stopped talking about anything but the game with Hikaru, and getting to see Touya Meijin play some other pro was so interesting for Hikaru and Sai that Hikaru forgot any self-consciousness about his subpar Japanese.

Sai made brilliant observations, naturally, that only reinforced in Hikaru's mind that Sai and Touya Meijin would probably have a really, really good game if they ever got to play each other, and that Hikaru felt guilty for not sharing.

It surprised Hikaru to realize, partway through the game, that even Hikaru himself seemed to see a few deeper points than the two men sort-of-but-not-really "with" him. He shared one that he and Sai both noticed, just as an experiment, and got praise for his good observation and skill.

'Aren't you pros?' he finally asked, too puzzled to remember tactful phrasing first.

One of the two laughed at him. 'No, Shindo-kun, we're-'

Hikaru didn't recognize the word. The men seemed to pick that up, given Hikaru's frown, and explained themselves differently. Hikaru

did recognize the phrase the other man used while indicating himself.

'Go Weekly?' he repeated, suddenly interested. 'I found that! I practice reading in it.'

'Ah, Go Weekly!' the first man mock-scowled, while the second puffed up exaggeratedly. 'Read Go World, is much better.'

The second scoffed at that. Hikaru was ready to be converted if given free evidence, but the first man didn't have a copy of his magazine anywhere, and when Hikaru pulled one of the old copies of Go Weekly out of his backpack the second man exclaimed in pleasure and started telling him about which old issues he should track down for this and that significant article. Hikaru borrowed a sheet out of the man's notebook and a pen to take notes.

It took him a bit to catch up to the game after that, though Sai's attention had never wavered, but Hikaru felt brave enough from the exchange to venture a few more observations now and again that continued to be well received. He even rephrased one of Sai's that Hikaru noticed as soon as the ghost mentioned it, but the men seemed so impressed by it that Hikaru lost his nerve for further showing off and asked questions about Touya Meijin or his opponent instead whenever one of the men asked Hikaru's opinion. Whoever they were, both seemed familiar with both pros' games and style.

On the train home Hikaru maturely resisted the urge to go charging up and down the corridor several times to make up for so much *being still* all day, and instead pulled out a Go Weekly to start reading with Sai.

Touya Meijin glanced down at the magazine when Hikaru opened it and asked, 'You read characters?'

'Practice,' Hikaru said truthfully, with a grimace. 'Very slow.'

His and Sai's rate had to be slow to a native reader, but Touya Meijin had no way to know how hopeless Hikaru would be at it on his own, which was why boy and ghost had decided it would be safe to read in front of him. Hikaru just had to remember not to mutter Sai's guessing out loud as if they were back in his room.

Touya Meijin surprised him, though. 'Would you like me to read?'

Hikaru barely resisted the urge to glance at Sai, but excited fluttering in his peripheral vision answered his unasked question anyway. Hikaru handed Touya Meijin the magazine and scooted closer. A tall hat leaned over unshadowed behind them.

Touya Meijin read clear and even, one finger tracing under each line as he went, which did nothing for Hikaru in terms of strengthening non-existent character recognition but did keep him solid on where they were on the page.

Touya Meijin got through the entire magazine in less than an hour. Hikaru thanked him at the end and bit his tongue on asking for any more. Touya Meijin glanced at Hikaru's backpack as Hikaru stuffed the magazine back in and asked, 'Another?'

Hikaru beamed as he pulled out the next.

The third, though, Hikaru had trouble concentrating on, until the article he knew was coming up arrived. Sai's face, in his upper peripheral vision, was still interested but slightly puzzled as Touya Meijin read through one of the few magazines Hikaru and Sai had already gone through themselves. Then Touya Meijin pronounced the next article's title, and Sai's fan snapped to a moment of stillness. Hikaru staunchly ignored the ghostly stare he could feel boring into the top of his head.

'That is... interesting, yes?' Hikaru blundered as soon as Touya Meijin finished the article, before he could start the next. 'Such a strong NetGo player...'

Touya Meijin made a thoughtful sound and laid the magazine down, still open, on his lap. 'Interesting, but... noisy. To play without name, without face, but say 'look at me'. They should just play Go, if they wish to play Go.'

Suddenly Hikaru felt terrible for having brought up the topic with Sai present.

'NetGo is Go,' he protested, trying not to sound defensive. 'Without Internet, can only play people here, close. Online you can play more, can play Go in... Africa, China, America... all here.'

Touya Meijin made another 'hmm' sound. 'You play NetGo, Hikaru?'

Hikaru nodded. 'This Jaro-very good player,' he said with a quick gesture to the magazine, concentrating hard on his words instead of either of his companions. 'Best on NetGo. Maybe... he play better than some you play here.'

'Is Jaro your teacher?'

Hikaru swallowed. Then he made his toes unclench and lay firm against his shoe soles. 'Yes.'

'Does he not prefer to play face to face?'

Sai was silent. Hikaru slouched a little in his seat, stymied.

Touya Meijin moved on to the next article. They got through half the magazines Hikaru had brought with him by the time the train reached Tokyo, which was awesome, and interesting, and informative. But it didn't get Touya Meijin to play Sai.

In which Hikaru and his father talk

A/N: WORK you stupid internet for just FIVE MINUTES... fingers crossed this actually gets posted properly. :(

Stepping Stones

~ **40** ~ In which Hikaru and his father talk

'You what?' Hikaru asked, hushed but incredulous, into his cell phone.

'Salon say we can play insei there Saturdays,' Miniboss said smugly. 'Half price! So tell insei to come.'

'I'm not with insei, I'm *busy* -and I never tell you my number,' Hikaru pointed out, though his protests were mostly rote as he thought through the idea rapidly. Playing the insei again in the salon closest to the neighborhood was certainly convenient for the gang-and pretty impressive they'd arranged it themselves, honestly-but it might be tough to convince the insei to travel farther and have to pay, even at half price.

How on earth had the gang managed half price, Hikaru hadn't successfully wheedled any discounts there even once...

'Told your mom is important.' Miniboss definitely needed to get beaten up on the Go board a few times by Sai before he got any more self-satisfied. 'So, find insei so I can tell manager we play next Saturday.'

'Talk to-' Did Hikaru really want to put Waya in direct contact with "Jaro's Disciples"? 'Fine, fine. Later. Don't call again, I'm busy!'

'We made team name,' Miniboss added just as Hikaru was about to hang up.

Hikaru's thumb paused before it reached the end call button. 'What?'

'We are Yankee! So insei have to find name too.'

'*I'm yankee, not you,*' Hikaru argued, momentarily forgetting his audience. 'You not American, you not yankee. Stay Jaro's Disciples and not fuss.'

Miniboss started to argue, but Hikaru hung up on him as he turned back to the rest of the game-observing room.

'Sorry!' Sai hissed a more formal-sounding apology; since Hikaru wasn't sure exactly how rude it had been that his cell phone went off, he repeated Sai's words too. 'I'll turn it off,' he added, matching actions to words.

'Are you insei, Shindo?' the guy Hikaru was pretty sure was the Go Weekly one from Osaka asked, impressively politely considering he looked more curious and amused.

'No, I just make them play other children,' Hikaru explained without remembering to word it first. Both Touya Meijin and the guy whose name he probably really ought to know looked more interested in him now than the game in progress, though, so Hikaru swallowed any embarrassment, took a deep breath while listening to Sai's undertoned advice, and tried again.

'I... some children in my neighborhood play Go, and wanted to play new opponents, so Touya Meijin let them play insei in his salon.'

'Do they wish to play again?' Touya Meijin asked.

Hikaru nodded distractedly, trying not to look like he was splitting his attention between them and Sai even though he was. 'Yes, but they find new salon, on their own, to play in. Want me to ask insei if insei will play there.' Then he paused to look around. 'This is insei building too, yes?'

It kind of seemed like the everything-Go building, at least in Tokyo, except for not also being a salon.

Touya Meijin gave him directions on how to get from where they were in the building to where the insei studied, which Hikaru paid attention to even though he was just going to ask Waya to talk to them for him. Then Touya Meijin asked, 'Do you know the word yankee, Hikaru?'

Hikaru grinned. He couldn't help it, even though Sai hid his face in his fan in Hikaru's peripheral vision. 'Means American.'

The Go Weekly guy blinked. 'It does?'

'In English,' Hikaru clarified. 'I'm yankee. Neighborhood children have to learn English to be yankee, just being brats not enough.'

Sai's glare suggested disapproval that Hikaru had gone off script. The Go Weekly guy was smiling though.

'These children play Go?' he asked. 'Where do they play?'

Hikaru told him the name of the salon, though he wasn't sure why the man was interested. Still, it couldn't do any harm, could it-well, not after Hikaru remembered to mention to the gang that he'd dismember them and bury their corpses if they showed anyone his home.

Maybe have to work out how to tell them that when Sai wasn't around... why couldn't the stubborn little brats pick up complicated-as-a-second-language-English purely for Hikaru's convenience at times like this?

"Son."

Hikaru looked up from his laptop, startled, to see his father standing in his bedroom doorway. He hastily clicked Sai's last indicated

placement onto the board onscreen then looked at his father again.
"Yeah?"

His father was frowning slightly at the laptop. "Can that be paused?"

"Um, no, there's time limits on each turn... it's kind of a real-time thing. I have to forfeit or play to the end."

"Are you almost done with it?"

"Not even into yose..." Hikaru glanced at Sai while mousing toward the Resign button. Sai's solemn gaze flicked from Hikaru to his father and back.

His father's frown looked heavier. "How long will it take you to finish?"

Hikaru looked at the board critically, replaying all the hands already placed in fast forward in his head. "Not more than an hour, unless this guy gives up sooner."

Most of Sai's opponents did, but there was no telling when against someone they hadn't played before.

The opponent's next stone appeared on the board. After a cautious glance toward Hikaru's father, Sai whisked out his fan to tap at his choice. Hikaru clicked it.

"You never seemed to play very long at a time in America."

"Yeah, I learned on baby boards," Hikaru said distractedly. "And I wasn't as good back then."

There was a long pause where Hikaru's father didn't say anything or leave. A dialogue box popped open on Hikaru's screen announcing his opponent's resignation.

Hikaru clicked it closed and logged out of NetGo before turning back to face his father. "He resigned. I'm done now."

His father was still frowning, but now directed at the laptop. "Just how good are you, really?" he asked slowly. "You didn't make any fuss over that tournament..."

Hikaru's gaze automatically slid to the dusty trophy that had migrated to the current position of bookend for his Go magazines.

His father evidently followed the look. "You won?" He sounded surprised.

"Beat Gramps on how young I got it." Which was why it was now out on display at all, since it was still a pretty dumb trophy. "But it wasn't a big deal. I mean, isn't... it's just a trophy."

"That tournament advertised itself as significant in Go."

Hikaru shrugged uncomfortably.

"Hikaru..." Hikaru's father looked from the shelf of Go Weekly, to the kifu spread untidily across half the desk, to Sai's goban in the corner. He stepped into the room and sat down on the end of Hikaru's bed. "When did this happen? When did you stop... playing an online game and start thinking about making it a career?"

Hikaru had automatically swiveled his chair to face him, which brought Sai back into his peripheral vision on his other side, quiet but present. Not that he could follow an English conversation.

Hikaru thought about it, and finally shrugged. "It just... grew. I started playing more, then I started making friends who play-"

"But you can't think playing with other children-" Hikaru's father began.

"Isumi made pro at the last exam," Hikaru interrupted, fighting to keep a scowl off his face. "Wayu only lost out by one spot. And he jokes about how hard he'll have to work to make the next one since

Akira and I will have two of the passes." The scowl won briefly. "I mean, *would* have."

An intangible hand in a white sleeve rested over Hikaru's arm for a moment. He didn't actually catch Sai's murmur, but it sounded the same as the times Sai encouraged him to somehow show his father how steady and mature Go made him and how worthwhile it was. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Your friends are all... serious." His father was quiet for a moment. "But friends should be supportive. Do you have any more objective opinions?"

"My teacher thinks I can do it. And Touya Meijin, and he's pretty much the best professional in the entire country."

"You have a teacher? Is this another professional?"

Hikaru resisted the urge to squirm. "Not a current pro," he muttered. "But he's as good as them. *Objectively*," he added before his father could start to say anything. "He's beaten pros online."

"Where did you find a teacher? How long have you have had one?"

Necessary lie. "Online. For... ages now." Sai murmured. Hikaru took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Pretty much since we got to Japan. I met somebody who could teach me a lot-online-and Go was... something familiar I could still do. So I did. And got better. A lot better."

His father was quiet again, looking around the room at all the evidence of Hikaru's choice of study. "You've never even had a summer job. You played soccer but never even joined a school team. Yet you're sure you want to take this game and launch it straight into a career?"

Hikaru thought of all the arguments and reservations he'd had over that himself. He didn't feel like rehashing them. "Yes."

"What happens if you get bored? If you find a new game to interest you?"

Hikaru's lips thinned, but he bit back his impetuous first response and made himself think it through. "I spend pretty much all day I'm not at school or doing homework doing something involving Go. And I always get irritated about school and homework always interrupting Go. If I turn pro, I can get paid to play, so I won't have to keep spending hours doing other stuff that interrupts Go."

"You've gone through obsessive phases for almost every new thing you find."

"Go's not new!" Sai murmured anxious reminders in Hikaru's ear. "I'm not going to get tired of it. I haven't got any way to prove it except I'm going to keep playing, just like I have been for months."

"That will be good proof." His father paused, while Hikaru blinked at hearing something that had almost sounded like agreement. "But quitting school now would be a mistake. You're too young to throw out all possibilities for your future except one."

Hikaru opened his mouth to protest. His father talked over him.

"Your mother and I have discussed this, and come to a decision. You will, at minimum, graduate high school. But, if you prove you can keep your grades up despite other interests, we will allow you to take this exam after you turn sixteen. And, if you show ability to make a decent living with Go by then, we won't insist on university."

Hikaru bit his tongue hard to keep from protesting at having to wait until sixteen. It was a concession, that was good. But that'd be *forever* .

Sai's voice in his ear helped him swallow his instinctive reactions. He took a deep breath, then another. No wisdom came to mind except not arguing and making his dad change his mind.

So finally he said, "Okay."

"Good." His father hesitated another moment, then left.

Hikaru looked at Sai and changed his mind before he'd even started to explain what had just happened. Instead he picked up the pot of Sai's stones beside the desk and carried it out to the shed. Better to ensure no interruptions.

"Over two more years?" Akira looked about as happy at the prospect as Hikaru felt.

"I know, right?" he groaned, slumping beside their barely-started game for a moment. "I mean, it *is* better than eighteen and having to move out first..." Hikaru reflected uncomfortably on the concept. "A lot better," he admitted grudgingly. "But still! There's got to be a way to convince them to let me take it even earlier. Help me plot."

"Of course." Akira paused. "Plot?"

"Uh, think. Plan."

"Ah. Well... they already change their minds once, so... keep making small effort? Show you stay serious?"

"Yeah. And I asked Gramps if he could talk to Dad, but he just asked how much we wound up shouting, then said if he did there'd be a lot more."

"More shouting?" Akira's expression was the kind that suggested he was thanking his lucky stars to not have a family anything like Hikaru's and he would never for the nice polite life of him mention it. Hikaru tried to picture Touya Meijin even just raising his voice and failed.

Akira probably had a very quiet boring home life. Not that Hikaru would ever mention it.

"Well... maybe Father can help?" Akira suggested. "Maybe... if you go to see game during a school day, and show you do not fall behind..." He looked at Hikaru cautiously.

"Probably could handle that," Hikaru muttered, thinking hard. "I guess that would be a good idea, huh, cause if I make pro while I'm in school I'd probably have to skip sometimes for games..."

The amount of study that would be required to make up missed classes made him grimace, but with Sai's help he could wade through it. It'd be so much *easier* if he could just quit school to play Go...

"Maybe do more where they see, too," Akira suggested. "Study kifu of opponents-"

"What opponents?" Hikaru puzzled.

"Yours." Akira looked surprised. "Or... if you were pro already, if you had opponents, you would study kifu of their games before you play them."

"Huh." Hikaru felt enlightened. That made a lot of sense. And also brought a different idea to mind. "Hey, does your dad maybe have a birthday soon..."

"Birthday? Wh-"

"Akira-kun."

Hikaru looked up and Akira twisted around to look at the receptionist lady, whose eyes looked awfully shiny compared to her normal cheerful smile. She wasn't smiling now.

'-called, your father-'

Hikaru didn't recognize all the words she used, which may never have bothered him more. Akira's whole body tensed up. "Akira? What?"

"Ah?" Akira turned back to him, jerkily, eyes gone wide and blank.
"Ah... F-Father... heart, his heart, is... bad, sick. Sudden. He is taken to..."

Hikaru's stomach dropped. "Hospital?" he filled in the other unknown term numbly. "Are... what... your mom?"

"She... I will meet her there." Akira looked down at their game and just stared.

"No, yeah, go, I'll clean up here," Hikaru assured him, grateful to have the action as he returned stones to their pots. "I'm sure he'll be fine. He'll be fine..."

Akira went, escorted to the door by the receptionist lady's hand on his back. Hikaru tidied the goban and then left too, feeling lost on what to do.

He wound up in front of his grandparents' house, and after a moment shuffled inside, toed off his shoes, and found his gramps sitting on the sofa in front of the TV.

'You alright?' Gramps asked in surprise as Hikaru curled onto the couch beside him.

'Yeah. I'm okay.' And Gramps was okay. Gramps was young... young enough... he was healthy. He was fine. 'What's this?'

Gramps told him about the crazy antics required by the Japanese game show while they watched, and found other game shows after that one ended. Hikaru felt a little better by the time he went home for dinner, but his stomach still didn't feel normal afterward when he sat on his bed and searched through his translation dictionary, looking up the words for 'heart attack' and 'hospital' while Sai waited to find out what was wrong.

Both of them were quiet after Hikaru explained.

Akira called before Hikaru went to bed. "Father is alright." His voice sounded tired over the phone, but so much better. "He's going to stay for a while, for tests, but Father's alright."

Hikaru let out a deep breath of relief. Sai looked at Hikaru's face and murmured something that sounded like a prayer of thanks.

Hikaru resolved to make more time to spend with his grandparents anyway.

In which Hikaru visits Touya Meijin

Stepping Stones

~ **41** ~ In which Hikaru visits Touya Meijin

"What's all that?" Hikaru's mother asked when Hikaru came out of his room stuffing a small stack of paper into his backpack.

"Some kifu for Touya Meijin. Akira told me visiting hours." Hikaru tried to wriggle his shoes back on one-handed while he slung the backpack on.

"Give him our best wishes."

"He's fine." It seemed like those two words kept getting repeated every time Hikaru mentioned anything about Touya Meijin, but he still wasn't tired of saying them. "I will. Back later."

"Bye hon."

Hikaru made it to the hospital by himself, feeling oddly alone even though he'd deliberately called Gramps after school to tell him Hikaru would be late picking Sai up. Sai would probably appreciate seeing Touya Meijin was fine himself, but Hikaru had a plan, and he didn't want Sai disappointed again if it didn't work.

Hikaru talked at the reception desk and got directions to Touya Meijin's room on his own too, which left him with a distracted feeling of accomplishment when he poked his head around the doorway and saw that he had, indeed, found Touya Meijin, sitting up in a hospital bed.

Touya Meijin looked up as Hikaru edged inside, suddenly awkward over wearing his backpack. 'Good afternoon, Hikaru.'

'Hi. Akira said you're fine?' Hikaru perched on the visitor's seat by the bedside, sliding his bag around into his lap.

'Yes. I will be fine.' Touya Meijin smiled. Hikaru told himself he was an idiot for feeling relieved when he already knew that.

'Akira said... um.' Hikaru stopped to organize his thoughts, since Sai wasn't there to have helped him do so already. Then he organized his vocabulary, sparing only a few seconds to wish he'd brought Sai after all. 'Akira said you're here for a while, so I thought that might be boring, without Go?'

'Yes. But it cannot be helped.'

Hikaru took a deep breath, let it out quickly, and pulled out his stack of paper to plunk into Touya Meijin's lap. 'I thought, maybe... new opponents are good, while you're here? These are kifu of best games of best five players on NetGo. So you can study them, like real opponents, then play, here.'

Touya Meijin looked down at the stack for a moment. 'Which ones are your teacher?'

'Ones on top,' Hikaru admitted, ducking his head.

But a rustle of paper made him look up again, to see Touya Meijin examining the Jaro kifu close enough to actually be studying the games. That made Hikaru content to wait quietly where he was.

'To play Go on a computer seems very... cold. Distant,' Touya Meijin finally said. 'Takes away the human opponent.'

Hikaru tried not to let his disappointment show on his face.

'Your teacher is very good. He only plays on computers?'

Hikaru nodded, thankful Touya Meijin hadn't chosen any other phrasing that would require a lie. 'He really wants to play you,' he

confessed. 'I think...' He couldn't come up with any way to say it that sounded respectful.

But Touya Meijin raised a patient eyebrow when Hikaru didn't go on, and asked, 'Yes?'

'I know there are no kifu of equal games there, but... I think S-Jaro is good as you. Maybe.'

Five titles Touya Meijin had out of seven, and surely Go had advanced since Honinbo Shusaku's time, but Sai was still remembered as one of the greatest Go players of Japanese history and Sai thought he could have a really great game against Touya Meijin so surely that meant Sai thought they'd be about equal. And Sai would know best.

'You think so?'

Hikaru refused to lower his chin, but Touya Meijin only looked down at the kifu again, glancing from the second game against that Tendan guy to one against somebody who was either a really good amateur or didn't go around yelling he was a pro. Who was also among the top five on NetGo.

'Very well.'

Hikaru blinked.

'Tell your teacher I will play him. But I must learn to play on computer first.'

'It's easy! I can show you.' Hikaru dove into his backpack again and pulled out his laptop and power cord. 'Yes?'

Touya Meijin smiled faintly at him. 'Thank you.'

Hikaru gave the laptop to Touya Meijin, who got it open while Hikaru hunted down an outlet and plugged it in. Hikaru leaned against the

bed while he assisted Touya Meijin in getting online, navigating to NetGo, and exploring the site.

Touya Meijin asked plenty of questions, some of which were easy for someone who regarded his computer as an extra appendage and some of which had never occurred to Hikaru before. By the time they got to registering a new account Hikaru's feet had tired and he was squeezed on top of the bed at Touya Meijin's side, most of his formal vocabulary forgotten in his focus on the conversation.

Account created, they hunted for someone to play against while Hikaru explained the dearth of opponents requesting to play him.

'All people see is accounts. You have no games, no wins, people don't know you're not someone just learning to play. Good players get bored playing new players. Have to build up slow to get to good games.'

'No faces,' Touya Meijin repeated thoughtfully. 'Only... reputation?'

'Right.' Hikaru grinned. 'But when you play Jaro, everyone will notice and see you're good. Easy reputation from one game.'

A fellow new account agreed to play a game, and Hikaru walked Touya Meijin through the steps required to place virtual stones on a virtual goban. Touya Meijin's opponent resigned barely twenty hands in.

'What?' Touya Meijin asked with a frown when the dialog box popped up.

'Ah.' Hikaru grimaced. 'Online is... less patient. People see they will lose, they don't finish game.'

'That is very rude.'

'Well... yes, but... saves time, too. This was new player-not good game for either of you, so why play longer? Is better at higher level.'

Players more equal, and more mature. Mostly.'

'There is no test to show skill? To place yourself higher?'

'No. Free sign up, then just play, win or lose.' Hikaru chewed his lip thoughtfully. 'Like pros, right? Start low, win to get higher?'

'Yes. That is true.' Touya Meijin found another newbie who accepted his challenge. That game lasted almost thirty hands.

'You could say you're Touya Meijin,' Hikaru suggested, somewhat dubiously. 'Not online, but... in magazines?' Go Weekly included interviews with pros so there must be some interaction between people from Go Weekly and people like Touya Meijin. 'Would get better games then. Would get attention too though. New players like these wanting to see how good you are.'

'Your teacher gets such attention?' Touya Meijin asked.

'Lots and lots. Jaro much more patient than me.'

Sai could never possibly keep up with the flood of requests they got every time Jaro logged in, but he spent at least half his time playing teaching games until his opponents gave up. And he did it with so little complaint Hikaru suspected it wasn't even just because he didn't always get enough top-level opponents to fill his time.

'Patience is good to learn.' Another mid-level player ignored Touya Meijin's request. 'This is very different to professional Go. No names, no faces, no... boundaries. No difference between amateur and professional.'

'Yeah,' Hikaru agreed, even though he wasn't positive about all the words Touya Meijin had used. 'Is just... mismatch? Is mismatch because you pro there, amateur here. Better when people see you as pro here. Play Jaro for that.'

'Jaro only plays online. His manners are... like this? Online?'

Hikaru considered for a moment, taken by surprise by the question. 'No,' he realized slowly. 'Jaro is... professional. Quiet, respectful, serious. Loves Go. Go is...' Would Touya Meijin recognize Hikaru's attempted distinction? 'Not just game. Go is serious.'

'Then I will play him seriously.' Touya Meijin gave up challenging random users and moused around a bit aimlessly. 'How does one retire?'

Hikaru showed him the logout button, but logged back in on his own account to show Touya Meijin an example of a higher-level online game that was less likely to end quickly. That game lasted until his mother made sure he was going to be home at a reasonable hour via cell phone.

'I will tell Jaro,' Hikaru promised as he packed up his laptop, leaving the stack of kifu with Touya Meijin. 'And he plays often, so you can play him soon. It will be really, really good game, Touya Meijin, thanks!'

Sai's reaction was considerably more enthusiastic than Hikaru's when he heard, which made it fortunate they were still at Gramps' instead of home. Surely some registers would eventually break the ghost/human sound barrier and leave any innocent bystanders wondering where on earth all the squealing was coming from.

'Sai say nothing?' Gramps asked when Hikaru didn't try to translate anything after he announced the news.

'Talking fast as bullet train. Can't understand anything,' Hikaru grinned.

Gramps laughed, and Hikaru cheerfully collected the pot of stones he'd dropped off that morning and ushered the still-exulting ghost toward the door.

By the time they'd gotten home, eaten, and forded through homework, Sai had finally calmed down to the point of coherency. Which meant Hikaru then had to convince him that it was too late to go visit Touya Meijin again with Jaro's confirmation, really, visiting hours were over so they wouldn't be able to see him anyway even if Hikaru's parents let him go back downtown seemingly alone after dark. Which they wouldn't, really, no point in even asking.

' *Tomorrow, then?*'

'Well...' Hikaru caved. 'Okay.'

Sai squealed, hugged, and declined NetGo in favor of collecting all obtainable Touya Meijin kifu to begin study of his upcoming opponent. Unfortunately, no, really, they couldn't go visit the game records room in the Go building until tomorrow either. They made do by flipping through all their issues of Go Weekly in search of any Touya Meijin kifu they hadn't seen before.

'Jaro says,' Hikaru carefully echoed Sai's words, 'yes, he is honored to play and he will play-'

' *Any time!*' Sai instructed.

'-Any evening,' Hikaru recited.

Sai pouted, but Hikaru was *not* going to stick himself in the middle of class again texting moves on his cell phone, unable to pay attention to the game. Not for a game between Sai and Touya Meijin.

'I am honored,' Touya Meijin said. 'Do you have more kifu of your teacher's games, Hikaru?'

"Mmm..." Hikaru thought fast. 'Yes. Not many really good though.'

Sai objected to his phrasing.

'Not many against really good opponents,' Hikaru tried.

Sai winced.

'Good like you,' Hikaru finished, exasperated with the difficulties of politeness.

Sai hid his face behind his fan.

'Are there kifu online, as games are online?' Touya Meijin asked.

'Yeah!' Hikaru had brought his laptop again just in case Touya Meijin wanted to practice more on NetGo. He set it up and showed Touya Meijin how to navigate to the site's repository of past games for each player. 'Only keeps for few months, but some good ones still here. See...'

Touya Meijin tried navigating himself and quickly gained competence.

'Ah, but... is there printer here?' Sai and Touya Meijin both questioned Hikaru on what "printer" meant. Hikaru searched his mind again for any time he'd heard it in Japanese and failed. 'Is... because, I have to go do homework, I can't stay, so...' Hikaru cast around and pointed to the printed kifu he'd brought the day before. 'Like that? To make that?'

Touya Meijin gave him a word. Sai murmured it in diligent echo to Hikaru.

'Right. Print.'

'I do not know,' Touya Meijin said, and looked toward the doorway. 'Akira, is there printer nearby?'

'I can ask someone,' Akira said as he entered. Hikaru tried not to let himself get distracted from what everyone was saying by the weirdness of hearing Akira speak Japanese. 'Hello Hikaru. What are you doing?'

'Helping your father play NetGo,' Hikaru answered happily. 'I have to go, but we want to give him more kifu...'

Akira joined them in examination of the laptop screen, poked around the site some himself, and offered, 'I can use my computer to print from somewhere. You are going to play this person, Father?'

'Yes,' Touya Meijin said. 'While I am here, perhaps... tomorrow night? At seven?'

'Yes,' Sai said instantly.

'Yes,' Hikaru echoed. 'I will tell Jaro. He gets lots of challenges, so easier for him to challenge you? If you agree?'

'Very well,' Touya Meijin said. 'Will you be here, Hikaru?'

Hikaru managed to suppress the reflex to gulp. 'I have... parents are strict about homework,' he said carefully. Which wasn't completely untrue. 'Have to finish all homework before I can visit again, so...' No. Definitely, absolutely no, because trying to orchestrate an online game between two people in the same room with two accounts on one laptop, without revealing himself as a middleman, made his head hurt just imagining how much that wouldn't work. But he hated having to actually say 'No.'

'I can bring my computer tomorrow,' Akira offered. 'If you don't want to wait...?' He looked between Hikaru and Touya Meijin.

'No, yes, tomorrow is fine,' Hikaru insisted. 'I look up lots of things for homework, I can watch game at home at same time... I'll be fine. Tomorrow is good. Jaro is very eager.'

Sai nodded rapidly, looking the anxiety that Hikaru was trying to pretend he didn't feel.

'If you are sure,' Touya Meijin said. 'Tomorrow, then. Thank you, Akira.'

Hikaru restrained himself from subtly slumping against the wall in relief. Sai exhaled noisily and praised Akira for being a wonderful helpful son and excellent friend. Hikaru made a mental note to teach him shorter comprehensive terms later like "lifesaver."

In which Touya Meijin plays Jaro

A/N: In case it isn't obvious by now, I don't actually know how to play Go beyond the most basic rules. I hope the game manages to be satisfying anyway.

Only one more chapter left now, which will answer the question of whether Sai fades.

Stepping Stones

~ 42 ~ In which Touya Meijin plays Jaro

Hikaru was actually in the backyard shed, with all his homework spread around him, when seven o'clock in the evening came. His intention had been to get some of his homework done before the game against Touya Meijin, but the last hour plus was instead taken up trying to keep Sai from vibrating himself to another plane of existence, scouring the Internet for basically anything containing Touya Meijin's name as a distraction, and finally, a full fifteen minutes before the agreed time for the game to start, logging onto NetGo so Sai could obsessively scan the list of players currently online for Touya Meijin's username.

Touya Meijin logged on two minutes before seven. Hikaru and Sai had a brief argument over punctuality that ate up the extra minutes and clicked the button to request a game. Sai held his breath while Hikaru reminded him that of course Touya Meijin wasn't very fast since he wasn't used to using computers.

Touya Meijin accepted. The game began. All of Sai's fluttering, chattering, and fan whisking vanished into laser-like focus. Hikaru watched the first few hands grow, ready to be impressed, and instead found himself absorbed.

He'd always known Sai was good, it was the same kind of fact as "the sky is blue," but he'd never realized he didn't know just how good, because Sai had never faced an opponent that brought out his full skill.

He'd known Touya Meijin was good, obviously, seeing as he had all those titles and everything, but Touya Meijin's level of skill was an abstract. He was better than Hikaru, given the game they'd played, but there was no upper limit to the range of "better than Hikaru."

But here, now, Sai was better than Hikaru had ever imagined. And Touya Meijin equaled him. Stone after stone, shape after shape, Hikaru couldn't even predict who was ahead. If there was ever anything like a perfect game, it had to be this.

Hikaru found himself leaning back against Sai's goban every now and again just to breathe and admire during the pauses between moves, but Sai's focus never wavered. His gaze never flickered from the screen even when a passing thought made Hikaru stretch to the side and grope for his cell phone.

'Go on NetGo,' he told Waya when the older teen answered. 'Jaro is playing.'

Muffled sounds crackled through the line as Waya did so. Hikaru grinned at his friend's reverent curse and hung up, chucking his phone away without looking to see where it landed. Touya Meijin had just placed another stone.

The number of spectators watching climbed higher and higher as the game went on, still as closely matched as at the start. Hikaru vaguely supposed Waya must have told more people, then realized probably everybody watching was telling more people. This was, without question, the best game Jaro had ever played.

This was the first time Jaro might legitimately lose to a better player.

Hikaru couldn't seem to stop smiling, and didn't care. Sai was nearly glowing with happiness through his intensity.

The game moved into midgame, still close, and finally into endgame. Hikaru tried to count accumulated territories and kept getting lost because they were so intertwined. Each move came after longer pauses now, when one less-than-perfect placement could be the reason for defeat.

Vague, wild thoughts of *if a lightning strike crashes our power now* flitted through Hikaru's mind, but nothing happened, only one more stone and one more after that continuing to appear on the board.

Touya Meijin made his last placement. Sai made his. The dialog box for 'Game Complete' popped up, with the tiny interminable pause while the site calculated territory to determine the winner.

Hikaru didn't breathe.

The rest of the details filled in the dialog box. Winner: Jaro, by half a point.

Hikaru whooped, or possibly screamed, without the slightest regard for volume. Sai seemed to collapse for a second, but his smile barely fit on his face.

'You *won*, you beat Touya Meijin, you're greatest player ever and you *proved* it,' Hikaru chanted, victory hopping around Sai's goban.

' *Hikaru!*' Sai protested, laughing. '*I lost without komi, he had five points* - '

'But you didn't, because Go has komi now,' Hikaru retorted. 'You *won*, you proved you're best ever-'

Hikaru's phone buzzed with an incoming call from Waya. They shared barely-coherent rapture over the game just finished, then Hikaru called Gramps to let him in on the celebration.

Sai kept protesting the fuss, which Hikaru kept ignoring since Sai couldn't stop smiling either. They eventually calmed enough to reseal themselves at the computer and start discussing the completed game, but kept getting sidetracked and slowed down by congratulations and enthusiasm for this move or that counter. Hikaru got the vocabulary down pat for calling Touya Meijin and Sai both brilliant and the best players of the best game ever. Sai blushed and hid his face behind his fan a lot but kept coming out to agree it was a wonderful, magnificent game, especially because of that move here and there...

"Didn't get axe murdered out there earlier then?" his mother inquired when Hikaru finally started hauling his stuff back in for the night.

"Really awesome Go game. It got exciting," Hikaru grinned, even over his load of goban, laptop, and textbooks.

His mother just shook her head with a smile. "Don't forget to brush your teeth before bed."

"Yeah yeah!"

Hikaru deliberately didn't open his laptop again once he'd restored everything to their places around his room. No doubt there was already massive speculation and discussion on the forums over Jaro's latest game, but at least for tonight, Hikaru didn't care. Sai had gotten to play Touya Meijin, and not been disappointed by the game. Everything else could come what may in the morning.

Hikaru actually was getting quite a bit behind on homework due to taking so many trips to the hospital instead, but after a game like that there just didn't seem to be any other reasonable thing to do once school let out the next day. He did save a bit of time by taking Sai to school with him though, so he didn't have to stop at Gramps' in between.

Akira was in the hallway punching buttons on a vending machine when they got to the hospital.

"Hey Akira!" Hikaru called before remembering to lower his voice, but made no attempt to restrain his enthusiasm. "Did you see the game last night, wasn't it *amazing* -"

"Hello Hikaru. Yes, I was here with Father while he played. I cannot remember a game like it before."

Hikaru bounced on the balls of his feet a little. "He's not mad is he? I can't believe Jaro won, I couldn't even tell if either of them was ever ahead they were both so *good* -"

"Father is happy when he lose to someone, means better games in future," Akira said. "Hikaru, who *is* Jaro? To play my father and win..."

Hikaru stopped bouncing. Sai's fan started whirring behind him. "Eh... my teacher. My online teacher. I can't tell you anything else about him, I... he's just Jaro."

Akira looked faintly skeptical, so Hikaru hurried on, "So, I was gonna pop in and congratulate your dad, you don't think he'd mind? Did you guys discuss the game any after-I forgot to tell him NetGo doesn't really let you do that after the game's over, but there is a chat box you can use during games, or-well, that gets really crowded, maybe-never mind. Anyway, it's okay if I go up?"

"Yes, of course. I am going to salon to bring Father some papers. I will see you later... somewhere?"

"Yeah, I can't really stay too long since I didn't get much homework done last night after the game started. Play you at the salon again this weekend?"

"Yes. Good."

Touya Meijin was sitting up in bed like usual when Hikaru and Sai peeked around the doorway.

'Hi Touya Meijin,' he greeted, carefully not echoing what Sai said since he was pretty sure it was a different kind of greeting. Respectful, definitely, but not one used between a grownup slash teacher and a kid slash student.

'Hello Hikaru. I could not thank your teacher for the game last night.'

Sai bowed deeply from the waist and murmured. Hikaru listened carefully, trying to look natural. 'Sorry, there is...' He thought hard for the term, he'd gotten into a discussion with Waya that included it not that long ago and he'd even used it himself, 'message, private? message between players I forgot to show you. Jaro say, all thanks is his, he was very honored to play such a... beautiful game. And thank you.'

'I wish to play him again,' Touya Meijin said. 'Is there no way to face him on a real board?'

Hikaru tried hard not to see Sai's expression, but didn't succeed. 'Jaro can only play online,' he repeated, with genuine regret. 'I'm sorry.'

'Then I will play him again online, if he will play me.'

Sai bowed again, not as far, but he didn't burst into excitement this time. He just nodded, still looking terribly yearning.

'Yes,' Hikaru translated. 'He is happy to play you.'

Somehow it didn't sound quite as true as it had last night. But what other option was there? Hikaru wasn't that Shusaku Torajiro person, who evidently acted as just a puppet body for Sai when it came to playing Go. People would notice if Hikaru's skill suddenly shot up to Sai's level, and Hikaru didn't want to stop playing Go himself. That wasn't selfish, was it?

'I am honored,' Touya Meijin said. 'Akira told me your parents are better toward Go?'

"Um..." Hikaru dragged his mind away from Sai's plight. 'Yes. Some.' He explained the current stance on when he could take the exam, with a bit of occasional help from Sai.

'That is good,' Touya Meijin said when he finished. 'Do you think, even if you miss classes to go to other cities, you could keep up with your school?'

Hikaru nodded slowly. It'd take extra work, but everything the teachers lectured was in the textbooks, so he and Sai should be able to handle it. 'You have another game somewhere, Touya Meijin?'

He was definitely in on going again if he could. Visiting Osaka had kind of felt like both he and Touya Meijin were tourists, even though it was still Japan. And especially if Touya Meijin was good with him bringing more Go magazines.

'I do not have many games that are not here since I am professional,' Touya Meijin said. 'I have thought recently my Go is limited by that. I think, after this, I will retire, and travel more to play Go.'

Hikaru blinked, then blinked again. He was pretty sure he knew that word, but... 'Retire?'

'Be amateur now, not professional,' Touya Meijin explained gently.

Hikaru blinked some more, just to keep from looking at Sai to see if he was as shocked by that as Hikaru. 'After... what this? Playing Jar-'

Then he remembered they were currently sitting in a hospital room and flushed. 'Sorry, never mind-'

'Not only because of Jaro,' Touya Meijin answered anyway. 'But... playing Jaro showed me professional matches do not guarantee best games. I wish to explore, to see what other games I can find where I have not looked before.'

'But...' Sai tried to question Hikaru, undertoned, but Hikaru's hesitation was due to trying to figure out what to ask rather than how to ask it. 'I thought professional games are best, because... professional players...?'

'Why should you be professional?' Touya Meijin suggested, in approximately the same words as Sai.

Hikaru nodded.

Touya Meijin leaned back a little against the pillows propping him up. 'Is true, mostly, professional players are best,' he said. 'Jaro is professional?'

Hikaru shrugged uncomfortably, and tried to look too rapt to want to go off on that tangent. Thankfully Touya Meijin let it go.

'Professionals spend most time playing Go, because they are professional. To be professional is best way for you to play better opponents, better games, to improve your skill. But to be professional is... structured.'

Hikaru bit his tongue to keep from interrupting for a mini quiz on what the last word meant. It'd distract them both from Touya Meijin's point and maybe he could figure it out from context anyway.

'Professional games are scheduled, and arranged by rank and tournament. You play many good games that way, but if you wish to simply play someone, they may be busy when you are free, you may be busy when they are free...'

Hikaru frowned. 'Akira and I will still play lots...?'

Touya Meijin smiled. 'Yes. Between friends, you will make more time to play easily. But there have been times foreign professionals visited Japan, I would have liked to play them, but could not, because of our schedules. Retired, I will have no schedule, so I can fit theirs better. I can travel to visit them, if I wish. And, perhaps... there is a difference in games not played for prizes. In games... not for teaching, not for title... just Go.'

Hikaru thought about that briefly. 'Like Jaro.'

Touya Meijin nodded his head deeply. Sai's hat bowed forward from Hikaru's side. Hikaru grinned.

'Retired sounds better than professional,' he decided, ignoring Sai's protest.

'But if I was never professional, no professional would wish to play me,' Touya Meijin pointed out gently. 'Like on NetGo. No name, no face, no reputation... no interest. No way to know I play well.'

'I see,' Hikaru admitted, with more cheer than bad grace. 'So I will be professional, and get reputation-and money,' he remembered, then grinned. 'Then I retire and play like you.'

Sai chided, sighed, and admitted that sounded like a very fine life to live. Touya Meijin smiled.

'If your parents allow, would you like to come sometimes?'

'Really? More new places?' Sai listed off a few Hikaru wasn't sure he recognized-Saikaido, Sendai, Ezochi-that suddenly sounded like exotic getaway adventures. He fiddled with his sleeve as an excuse to glance at Sai, who looked just as excited.

'Yes. Good experience, to travel. And to meet professionals you might not later.'

"Wow." It might be a bit much for his parents to think about, if any trips ran overnight or longer, but he could convince them. He *would* convince them. Sai's voice in his ear urging a polite thanks and acceptance refocused him. 'Yes. Please. Sounds very... good. Nice.' A new thought occurred to him. 'Will Akira come?'

'Sometimes, perhaps,' Touya Meijin said. 'Akira has met professionals and known professional Go since he was very small. If he wishes, I will take him, but his interest is not same as yours.'

Huh. So that was craziness to ask Akira about later then.

'Not so many to interrupt school, though. For either of you.'

"Er," Hikaru agreed vaguely. Damn school again. What was Sai saying? 'Yes. Thank you. I will work hard, and be happy to ask my parents.'

'I will speak to them if they wish.'

Touya Meijin gave Hikaru a phone number that would normally reach him. Hikaru wrote it down by adding it to the contact list in his cell phone.

'Thank you. You...' Talk *casually*, he tried to mentally order Sai. 'Thank you for... helping me?'

'You will be very fine professional someday, Hikaru,' Touya Meijin said, making Hikaru flush. 'I am pleased to help that day come.'

Sai urged another gracious thanks Hikaru was too embarrassed to more than mumble, and made excuses about his homework and escaped soon after. But even with Sai scolding him for the precipitate exit he couldn't seem to help breaking out into silly little smiles most of the way home every time he recalled the praise.

In which life goes on

A/N: Here we go. I finished one of the oldest stories I've ever written... and the longest, by a wide margin. *Holy shit people, I wrote a novel.* I genuinely hadn't believed I could do that. (I still don't know how I did that.)

Hope it's a satisfying end for everyone who's enjoyed the ride. :)

Stepping Stones

~ 43 ~ In which life goes on

"Real world experience. It'd probably even make me all *cosmopolitan*," Hikaru pointed out from the floor as he threaded the laces in his new shoes. "You know, while my brain's still young and stretchy, I'd learn how to talk with people I don't know well, and not get lost easily, and never be afraid of new things-"

"As opposed to all those new things you're crippled with fear of now," his mother agreed from the sofa.

"I'll eat sushi," Hikaru bargained. "I'll choke down raw fish until I get food poisoning, I'll even smile while I die."

"Those things I called rice rolls you had seconds of last night were sushi," his mother said mildly. "From the shop down at the corner, by the way."

Darn.

"How cheap? I mean... I love you, Mom, I'll love you forever and always but if you *really* wanted to be known as the greatest parents ever in history for giving me such great learning opportunities as a kid I'd mention you in every thank-you speech I ever give. I'll dedicate my first title to you! Assuming Akira's left any for me by the

time I get to go pro. And have you talked to Touya Meijin yet? Because I already double-checked the number but if I got it wrong I can go get the right one for you while I'm out and let you know it right away, no trouble-

"Hikaru," his mother interrupted.

"I love you Mom," he repeated cheerfully.

She mock-frowned and then smiled at him. "Yes, your father and I have spoken with Mr. Touya, and we're thinking about it. Leisurely. He's not planning to leave for America before your semester ends-

Hikaru squealed. He wasn't even embarrassed about it. "Mom! He said? You'd let me? You can *not* tell me that if you're not planning to let me go, you're not that cruel! Pleasepleasepleaseplease-

"You'd have to come back," she pointed out.

"I know! That's fine! Please?"

"And the odds are tiny you'd be stopping anywhere close to anywhere you've been before."

"I've always wanted to see more places in America. Too. Here and there. And elsewhere. My life's ambition."

"For how many minutes?"

"More than one."

His mother laughed. "Give us a good presentation on why you should go once you've calmed down."

"I'll do flowcharts if you want them," Hikaru vowed. "And in the meantime just keep in mind I've already made that exact trip, without any problems, so I could even help Touya Meijin if he nee-I could be like his interpreter! If Go doesn't work out I can be a professional

interpreter instead Mom, so letting me go means giving me experience for *two* careers, I could even do both at once-

"Don't you still have somewhere to be?" she reminded him.

Hikaru finished stuffing his shoes on, hugged her, and swung back toward his room with his jacket to load up Sai's stones.

Hikaru got to the gang's salon less early than he'd intended for their tournament with whatever insei had agreed to come, but he wasn't late, so he let himself stop when he noticed a small sign taped in the window he didn't think he'd seen before. He made a guess (solid, he considered, given what store it was in) that it involved Go, and after a moment Sai made an a-ha! sound and deduced that it was announcing a Go match. A group match, including a team of insei.

"Seriously?" Hikaru laughed, under his breath since he was ostensibly alone in public. "Advertising?"

Still, if it did anything for the salon's business, maybe that explained how the gang got half-off prices. But seriously? Why would it do anything? Maybe it was just to let regulars know when to come watch or steer clear of the chaos.

Squirrel jogged up and ducked under Hikaru's arm as he opened the door. The first thing Hikaru saw inside was Miniboss hardly a step to the side chatting with the Go Weekly guy, who looked up and smiled in greeting as Hikaru came in. For a second Hikaru blanked in preparation for panic, then genius flashed and he snagged Squirrel by the shoulder before the kid could slip by into the herd.

'Introduce yourself. Nicely,' he instructed, as if it was because Squirrel needed manners practice and not because Hikaru couldn't come up with the guy's name to handle introductions himself for the life of him.

Squirrel shot him a dirty look and did so. The Go Weekly guy gravely introduced himself back as Amano-san. Hikaru let Squirrel go and greeted Amano too, by name, with the cheer of relief.

Most of the regulars appeared to have landed on the come-watch side of the poster, as the salon seemed unusually crowded with heads both tall and short. Hikaru managed to spot Tsutsui and Nase, the only two older kids available given his gang had gotten this rematch set up without any regard for anyone else's schedules, as he waded in to start herding straggler kids toward the evidently designated table and tried to get a headcount to make sure there was an equal number of neighborhood brats and insei present.

The kids sorted themselves into some semblance of order, Nase set up the game clocks beside each goban, and some guy Hikaru thought was a regular, or maybe even the salon manager or owner or somebody, made a brief over-dramatic speech that had both kids and adults smirking before declaring the games begin.

Hikaru wandered up and down the table regularly to let Sai keep up with each game in progress, and Nase and Tsutsui spaced themselves out to be near any potential problem, but mostly, compared to the first mini-me tourney, this one was surprisingly... easy. There was at least one interested regular for each kid to jibe with or get advice from whenever anyone's attention wandered, and the general noise level never quite dropped so low that anyone seemed to hesitate to speak.

Mostly due, Hikaru admitted freely to himself, to his gang's antics. They'd suck at normal, quiet Go matches. Well, at least until they grew up some. It looked like they'd managed to make a pretty good home for themselves here though.

The Go Weekly g-Amano also wandered along the games a few times, but mostly stood against a nearby wall watching or making notes. Hikaru wound up leaning against the wall beside him in between progress checks, and discovered the man was happy to

chat in undertones about Touya Meijin's retirement announcement and match against Jaro.

'I talk to Touya Meijin about why he retire now, and he mention he played online. And when I go online, so much talk! Such a mystery! Who played God of NetGo's equal?' Amano laughed, still quietly so as not to distract the squirts. 'And now every night they play again!'

'Not every night,' Hikaru corrected automatically, then tried not to flush. 'Er... I look.'

'Me too.' Amano smiled. 'Touya Meijin showed me how to find the kifu. This Jaro must be great pro! Yet never give his name. Very strange.'

Sai fidgeted, face still firmly pointed toward the mini-me tourney and expression suggesting he was working very hard to not hear. As if he could avoid it when he was only five feet away from Amano.

'Maybe he not Japanese,' Hikaru suggested, as casually as possible.

'Good guess,' Amano agreed. 'But no one seem to know... no one on NetGo, anyway. Maybe in other country. Even Touya Meijin say he not know. Went online so he could play Go in hospital. Great luck Jaro challenged him.' Amano laughed again, cheerful and low. Hikaru breathed out a silent, fervent prayer of thanks that Touya Meijin had evidently left out Hikaru's involvement. 'Touya Meijin play more online now even out of hospital. Can't blame him! Games that good, they should be for titles.'

'Well... God of NetGo is unofficial title,' Hikaru couldn't resist suggesting. Sai squirmed desperately and suggested they go look at the kids' games again.

Amano chuckled. 'True! Jaro play many games, though, Touya Meijin only play Jaro. Good luck for Touya Meijin to find rival, even at end of career,' he went on in a thoughtful tone. 'Maybe, no wonder he

retire... never found rival in professional matches, now he look elsewhere.'

Hikaru gulped, told himself the implication he'd heard wasn't there, and excused himself to let Sai check on the kids' games.

Touya Meijin hadn't said anything about trying to find Jaro when he told Hikaru why he planned to retire and travel. He didn't need to look, Jaro was right there online whenever they wanted to play. Hikaru had told him Jaro could only play on computers, this was just some guy's speculation, Touya Meijin understood...

And Touya Meijin won five titles, surely those games were as good as the ones with Sai-Touya Meijin *hadn't* won two titles, so those games would have to be as good as the ones with Sai. Assuming Touya Meijin had ever played for those titles.

One of the kids resigned and Hikaru busied himself echoing postgame analysis, with painstaking care for vocabulary, which wasn't as hard as usual. Sai was fairly quiet.

Lunch time hit, and the semi-order and peace dissolved into ruckus as the older teens tried to make sure all the kids had actually brought lunches like they were told to and help keep track of everyone's bento-lunchboxes and assorted debris. Regulars chatted with insei about their career prospects, Amano and the maybe-salon-owner-or-manager guy lent willing ears to Miniboss's stringent opinions on group names and the prestige of Jaro's Disciples versus Yankees, and Tsutsui made not-so-subtle pitches to each member of the neighborhood gang that they should attend his school (and Go club) as soon as they were old enough. Sai stood back and looked around at all the fuss with a fond, almost wistful smile.

'Okay?' Hikaru murmured to him during a moment when no one seemed to pay attention to their corner.

' Yes,' Sai said simply, fan fluttering. '*Is... Go. Is good.*'

"Yeah," Hikaru echoed to himself, looking around again with a new sense of pride. They'd managed to start something pretty cool out of a whim, hadn't they?

Then he dived in before Squirrel and Four Eyes could get into a war with chopsticks, half-parroting Sai's scoldings to remember good behavior if they wanted to be allowed to play here again, now apologize to the poor insei they just almost spattered.

'Shindo-kun is mature for his age,' Amano remarked to Miniboss over twin protestations of grievance.

'Eh,' Miniboss shrugged. 'Talks grown-up, still laughs though.'

'Okay?' Hikaru murmured, and Sai smiled and said yes, but no words he could find seemed to encompass all he felt at that moment. (Even when the children scuffled, as they always eventually did, and had to be scolded and refocused before the games could resume. Sai had become so used to it he hardly found himself minding.)

When Sai died-if, perhaps, he had really died, and wasn't drifting somewhere in between-his only thoughts had been for Go, for playing more, without imagining Go might ever change. When he woke to Torajiro's company, he had been delighted to discover an association devoted to the study and play of Go, and thrown himself into it (on Torajiro's behest) whole-heartedly.

With Heihachi he had been glad to hear that the "professional" Go world still existed-and had even expanded across oceans!-but contented himself with teaching this single student who, while interested in the game, was not much inclined to take himself farther. The world had progressed so much that there did not seem to be much time even for a student of Go to devote to its practice.

But now, with Hikaru (who turned out to be Heihachi's grandson)... Sai had never imagined so many things to be possible until Hikaru showed him. Clever Hikaru to have discovered how to free Sai from

the confines of his goban, to let him see the world outside his goban's storage place... it was both wondrous and frightening how unrecognizable his Japan had become. It made him grateful to be only a spirit now, who did not have to understand or interact with anything other than Hikaru except by observation. Sai would be lost were he to truly live again in this strange time.

The world's progression past him didn't matter though, because there was still Go. Still professional Go, established so solidly (as Hikaru found out, so slowly at first) that Sai dared to think it a permanent institution by now, existent regardless of time. But now, somehow, there was... even more.

Right in front of them, at that very moment, there were children and old men, most of whom neither played nor taught Go for their livings, and yet came together and played anyway. The old teaching the young, the young teaching each other, competing, congratulating each other in victory and in loss. And Sai, thanks to Hikaru, had a hand in bringing some of these children to love Go.

At a basic level, Sai did not quite understand how anyone could have interest in Go, could work to improve their play, without desiring to spend all their time on it. But he didn't need to understand to be happy, to look around at all this Go where Go might not exist at all. These children would grow up, turn to whatever professions were set for them if they did not choose Go, and even if they did not choose Go they would, perhaps, someday become these old men teaching new children to love the game as it deserved.

Sai was thankful, thankful to both his student and whatever gods had granted Sai these intangible extensions to his life, that Hikaru had decided to join the professional players and was never going to set Go aside for something else. Sai could hardly wait to see what beautiful games, what esteemed opponents Hikaru was going to play. And he was thankful beyond description that he himself could play Touya Meijin, and others in the world, through the magic box.

But something about this... about these children, collected from games in a neighborhood street, now sitting with pre-professional students and old men playing Go... there was something here Sai had never imagined before. Would never have imagined without Hikaru. And he was so grateful to now know of it.

Sai had never given much thought to why or how he had been allowed to exist past the end of his normal life. He was able to continue playing Go, as he desired more than anything; what else mattered?

But perhaps there was a reason Sai was granted this persistence, and perhaps it wasn't just to play Go. He had continued to exist after all not just when he was playing for Torajiro, but when he was only teaching Heihachi. What Hikaru had done here, bringing together such disparate people to bond over one game... it was not professional Go. It might not last, might not be remembered, as professional Go was.

But Sai could remember. Sai would remember. Sometime in the future, when Hikaru had ascended the ranks of the professionals and was a name committed to history like Touya Meijin (after a long life, long like Heihachi's not cut short like Torajiro's, a long career and a peaceful retirement of more Go), sometime when Sai met whoever would see him next...

Sai could reintroduce this play of Go-among-everyone if it had faded from people's memories. Sai could make sure Hikaru's legacy survived, every time Sai found a new companion...

Sai could not only play but preserve Go. While he existed, so too would continue some little part of Torajiro, of Heihachi, of Hikaru and Touya Meijin, of all the changes and influences to the game they wrought... they could live on through him.

The thought humbled him. And filled him with happiness.

There was no better fate he could imagine.

END